

Brazil BRL 14
Canada CAD 10

India INR 115
Malaysia MYR 14

Mauritius . . . MRU 115
Singapore . . . SGD 10

Trinidad TTD 48
UK GBP 5

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The Grueling Trek to Amarnath



COVER: Pilgrims returning down stone steps after worshiping the natural Ice Sivalingam at Amarnath Cave (in the background); spiritual and political luminaries attended the hundredth birthday celebration of Sree Sree Dr. Shivakumara Swami (center right)

APRIL/MAY/JUNE, 2013 • THE HINDU YEAR VIJAYA, 5114

Bodhinatha Veylanswami www.gurudeva.org

INTERNATIONAL

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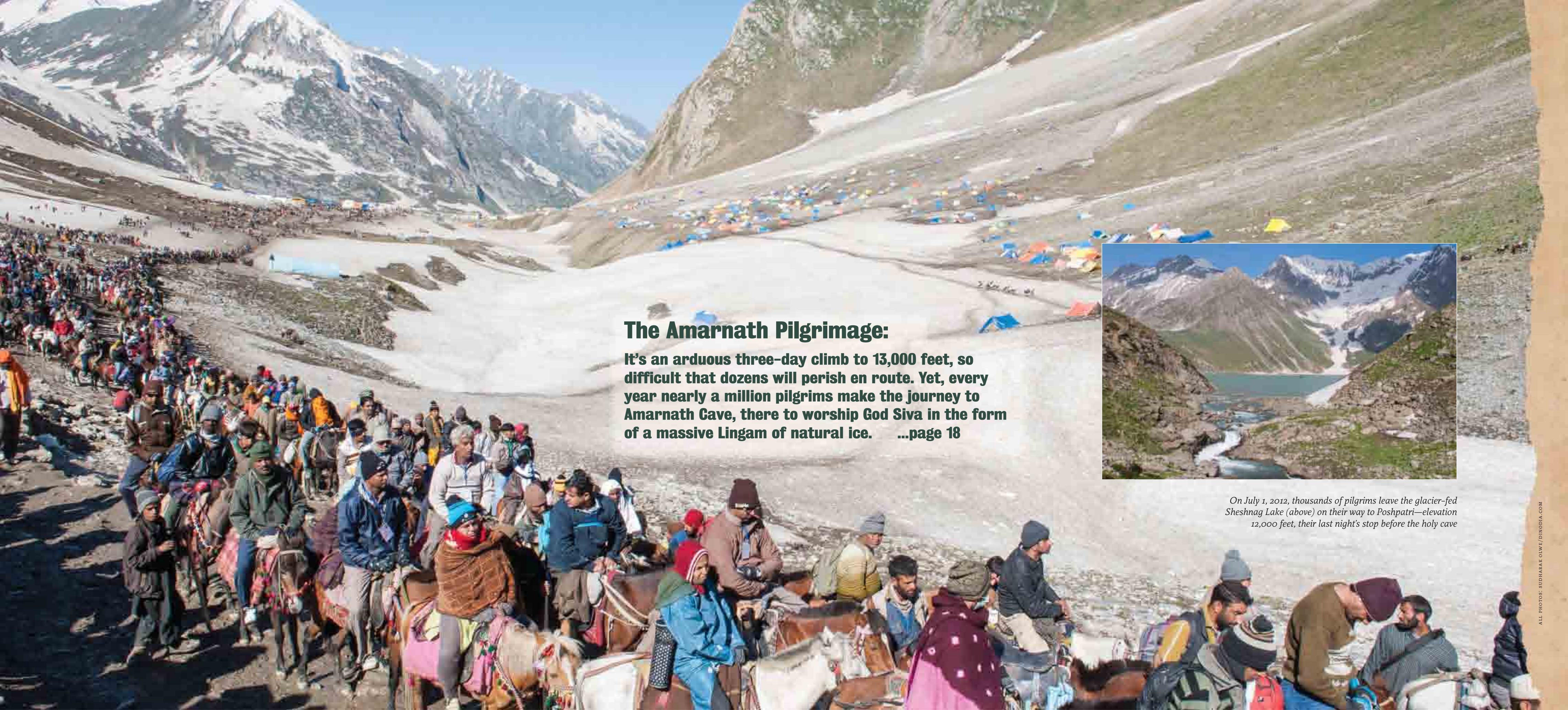
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Best Hindu Magazine



The Amarnath Pilgrimage:

It's an arduous three-day climb to 13,000 feet, so difficult that dozens will perish en route. Yet, every year nearly a million pilgrims make the journey to Amarnath Cave, there to worship God Siva in the form of a massive Lingam of natural ice. ...page 18



On July 1, 2012, thousands of pilgrims leave the glacier-fed Sheshnag Lake (above) on their way to Poshpatri—elevation 12,000 feet, their last night's stop before the holy cave



GLOBAL DHARMA

FORESTRY

Sandalwood's Global Value

IN LATE OCTOBER, TWO MEMBERS of HINDUISM TODAY's staff attended the International Sandalwood Symposium 2012 at the University of Hawaii's East-West Center. Much to their surprise, they found a global resurgence in sandalwood production underway from India to Australia. The meeting of experts discussed the tree's history,

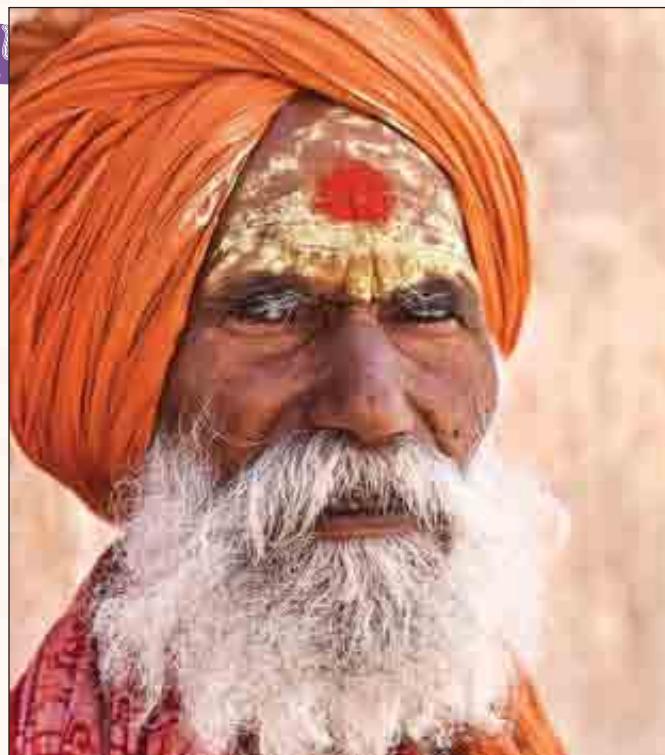


conservation, commercialization and ethnobotany.

In the 1970s India was exporting 5,000 tons of sandalwood a year. But over-harvesting has made this tree an endangered species. Today India exports just 400 tons a year. Demand remains so high that the wood costs \$2,000 per kilogram and increases in price 6% a year.

Sandalwood has been treasured for thousands of years. It is not only one of the world's oldest known perfumes, it is used in religious rituals and ceremonies. In Ayurvedic medicine it is used to treat sunburn, rashes, fevers, sores and more. Recent research in the West is revealing previously unknown medical uses.

The close-grained wood is popular for furniture



Sandalwood: A sadhu in Jaipur, Rajasthan, wears the holy sandalwood paste on his forehead; (left) a cut sandalwood log

building and carving, and its oil is found in countless consumer products including soaps, cosmetics, candles and incense.

The vacuum in the world market is inspiring entrepreneurial

interest. For example, the Western Australian Sandalwood Plantations company, established in 2001, has planted 10,000 hectares of land in native Australian sandalwood.

ITALY

Expanding Religious Freedom

ON DECEMBER 11, 2012, after a long struggle, Hinduism and Buddhism were granted official recognition under Italian law. This huge step towards religious freedom and equality throughout the country marks the first time the Italian government has legally acknowledged Eastern religions. Senator Ceccanti stated, "This is an extremely important decision which demonstrates our capacity to expand the system of religious freedom outlined by the Italian Constitution, along with its ability to go beyond the traditional Judeo-Christian context."

The decision resulted from an agreement between Parliament, the Italian Hindu Union and the Italy Buddhist Union. The Hindu Union received the government's official recognition as a religious assembly in 2000 and worked hard ever since to promote



Following the Decision: Svamini Hamsananda, Franco Jayendranatha and Swami Yogananda Giri of the Italian Hindu Union meet with Italian senators Vannino Chiti and Lucio Malan

Matteo Mecacci, president of the Committee on Human Rights, Democracy and Humanitarian Affairs of the Parliamentary Assembly of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, stated, "This is a historic achievement, after more than

30 years of efforts by Hindu and Buddhist Italians. It is an act of modernity, which expands religious pluralism in our country, an act that I hope will pave the way for the adoption of an expanded law for religious freedom."

TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; BOTTOM: ITALIAN HINDU UNION



HISTORY

Indus Valley, Even Older?

AT THE 2012 INTERNATIONAL Conference on Harappan Archaeology in Chandigarh, organized by the Archeological Survey of India, two ASI archeologists, B. R. Mani and K. N. Dikshit, announced they had evidence pushing back the date of the Indus Valley civilization by 2,000 years. Their conclusions were based on their 2003–2006 excavations of Bhirrana and Kunal in Pakistan and Rakhigarhi and Baror in India.

Bhirrana is a small Harappan village in the Indian state of Haryana, 220 kilometers northwest of Delhi. Artifacts recovered there include an advanced form of pottery known

as Hakra Ware, with 19 different radiometric dates. Such dating is based on measurement of naturally occurring radioactive isotopes found within the artifacts. Six of the pottery pieces were dated between 730 and 6201 BCE, while up to now the Harappan relics were dated only back to 3750 BCE. The archeologists reported, "The preliminary results of the data from early sites of the Indo-Pak subcontinent suggest that the Indian civilization emerged in the 8th millennium BCE in the Ghaggar-Hakra and Baluchistan area."

At 1.26 million square kilometers and five million inhabitants, the ancient Indus Valley



Mohenjo-daro: Located in the province of Sindh, Pakistan, it is one of the largest settlements of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization

(Harappan) civilization was the largest of the ancient world. This recent discovery moving its date back two millennia makes the Harappan the most advanced

civilization of early human history. The oldest sites unearthed in West Asia, such as in Jericho, are dated to 9000 BCE, but were far less advanced.

CENSUS

Earth's Third Largest Faith

THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER released "The Global Religious Landscape" in December, 2012, giving the size and distribution of the world's major religions as of 2010 based on a demographic study of more than 230 countries. They found there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians (32% of the world's population), 1.6 billion Muslims (23%), 1 billion Hindus (15%),

nearly 500 million Buddhists (7%) and 14 million Jews (0.2%). Ninety-seven percent of Hindus live in just three countries—India, Mauritius and Nepal—where they also form a majority. By comparison, 87% of Christians live in one of the world's 157 Christian-majority countries, while 72% of Buddhists live as minorities.



World's 2nd youngest religion: The median age of all Hindus is 26, younger than the median age of the world's population of 28

MILITARY

Teaching Soldiers Meditation

AT FIRST, MOST SOLDIERS question the benefits meditation might provide them, but the recently implemented Mind Fitness Training (M-Fit) is gaining popularity throughout many military camps and bases. M-Fit is proving itself to be an effective way to decrease fear and stress, alleviate depression and boost the immune system, while enhancing both reaction time and memory among soldiers.

The program was designed by former US Army captain Elizabeth Stanley who, after being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, became convinced

that meditation could help not only her, but anyone in the military.

Though there was skepticism, the program has earned wide popularity. Staff Sgt. Nathan Hampton, who originally thought it would be a waste, reports, "Over time, I felt more relaxed. I slept better. Physically, I noticed I wasn't tense all the time. It helps you think more clearly and decisively in stressful situations." Some soldiers reported that just a moment of mental silence is enough to set a positive pattern for their entire day.

The courses, offered two to



M-Fit: Elizabeth Stanley teaches soldiers to use meditation and relaxation techniques, with an emphasis on living in the moment

three times a week, consist of various meditation techniques, such as learning to focus on one point in the body or on the floor, quieting the mind and remaining in the moment.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; SHUTTERSTOCK; GEORGETOWN.EDU



PIONEERING VEGETARIANS

Meet William Cowherd

MORE THAN 200 YEARS AGO the aptly-named William Cowherd (1763-1816) established a chapel in Salford, England, where he preached the virtues of a vegetarian diet. Cowherd believed that God inhabits every animal and was quoted saying, "If God had meant us to eat meat, then it would have come to us in edible form, as is the ripened fruit."

He and his followers completely abstained from eating

meat. He told his congregation that it was a sin to eat meat, and that it could cause them to behave aggressively. At the time, most British considered such a diet harmful to one's health.

In 1847, his followers—known as Cowherdites—formed The Vegetarian Society, which is influential to this day in promoting vegetarianism. Mahatma Gandhi belonged to it in the 1880s while studying for the bar in England and even founded a local chapter.



Meatless ministry: Cowherd was popular for providing free medical services, a library and free vegetable soup to the public



Homeless Deities: When the temple's four Deities were placed safely outside the building complex during the demolition, Their gold jewelry and crowns were stolen

BRIEFLY...

SRI LA SRI BALAGANGADHARA-natha Swamiji, the 71st pontiff of the Adichunchanagiri Mutt in Nagamangala of Mandya district, attained mahasamadhi on January 13, 2013. Swamiji was 69 and had been suffering from multiple ailments for the last four years. Chief Minister Jagadish Shettar stated, "Swamiji not only built the Adichunchanagiri Mutt but also unified the unorganized Vokkaliga community. Through his hard work, dedication and spiritual power, he brought international recognition to the mutt. He never restricted it to any one community. He believed in oneness and helped all sections of society." Swamiji was a close friend and

supporter of HINDUISM TODAY and our 2007 Hindu of the Year.

A SRINAGAR SIVA TEMPLE CLOSED since 1990 has reopened in Rainawari. Its renovation was sponsored by the Jammu and Kashmir Dharmarth Trust at a cost of US\$33,000. It is just one of a hundred temples under the Trust's care, many of which were damaged during the years of local insurrection in the Kashmir Valley.

A RELIGIOUS ABSTINENCE SURVEY undertaken by the American Sociological Review shows that while all major world religions discourage sex outside of marriage, they are not all equally

PAKISTAN

Hindu Temple Razed

ON DECEMBER 1, 2012, THE 100-year-old Shri Rama Pir Mandir was demolished by a builder who claimed he owned the property on which it had been located, despite a court order postponing the demolition. Several surrounding houses were also destroyed, leaving 40 people homeless.

"They destroyed our mandir and humiliated our Gods," a local resident, Prakash, angrily told *The Tribune*. A man

named Lakshman in *India Today* said, "They hit me with their guns when I tried to stop them. I told them to kill me instead of destroying our holy place."

The Pakistan Hindu Council stated that 25 Hindu families leave for India each week. In response to the demolition, Council Founder Ramesh Kumar Vankwani told *India Real Time*, "We don't need to migrate; we need protection for our lives and property in Pakistan."

effective in shaping behavior. The study included data from 31 nations between 2000 and 2008. It showed Hinduism to have the lowest rates of premarital sex (19%), while Judaism (94%) and Christianity (79%) had the highest ratings of premarital sex and extramarital activity.

AN ANCIENT HINDU TEMPLE was recently unearthed in Bali. The local archaeology agency says workers digging a drainage basin in eastern Denpasar, Bali's capital, first discovered a large stone about three meters underground. The excavation then uncovered a 57 meter foundation which is thought to have been built sometime in the 13th or 15th century. It is possibly the largest ancient temple ever discovered in Bali.

NEW FORTIFICATIONS HAVE BEEN ordered to protect Padmanabhaswamy Temple Vaults in the state of Kerala. This order was given by India's supreme court in early November, 2012. The temple's six vaults are filled with priceless valuables. A scientific committee has been appointed to document the extensive treasure.

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FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: VEGETARIAN SOCIETY; NEWSCOM/S. IMRAN ALI/PPIMAGES



IN MY OPINION

How I Became a Hindu

My search for a religion that would bring me to a confrontation with Truth has led me to Hinduism

BY PARTHA J. MILLER



HINDUISM TODAY was founded on January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001). It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy, with the following purposes: 1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects and lineages; 2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; 3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; 4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred *Vedas* and the Hindu religion; 5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance; 6. To publish resources for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. Join this *seva* by sending letters, clippings, photographs, reports on events and by encouraging others.



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Having set this criteria for my pursuit, it was Hinduism to which I turned. As fate would have it, there in my own town was a Chinmaya Mission temple. Swami Siddhananda, our temple acharya, along with the temple members, welcomed me with great warmth. As I entered this new world with childlike ignorance, Swamiji patiently answered all my questions. He showed me the very basics, including participation in puja and arati. I held the philosophy of Hinduism close to my heart and felt it easy to assimilate, but I did have difficulty learning the most basic cultural acts and behaviors, those that the children at the temple performed so naturally.

After attending the temple for a year, I decided to make a more concrete commitment. I asked Swamiji if there was a formal ceremony that could be done to mark my conversion. He and Pandit Ekambaram Prasad, our temple priest, performed the

initiation. During the ceremony, Swamiji gave me the name Partha.

A few Christians and others criticized me. They argued that one must draw on one's own heritage. They said Hinduism is an ethnic religion for Indians only, and I would not be able to fully engage in an "alien" faith. I'd ask, to which heritage of mine should I turn?

The Methodism of my grandmother's family? Or perhaps the Mennonites they had previously been? Or the Lutheranism of my paternal grandfather? My ancestors were many things, converting from one religion to another in the face of change.

Hinduism is not as alien to Westerners as one might suppose. American conceptions of the Self and God have been evolving since the early nineteenth century. The writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and other members of the Transcendentalist movement introduced Hindu concepts to the broad American public. Theosophists later popularized, however inaccurately, many Hindu concepts and paved the way for the arrival of Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda. Today increasing numbers of non-Hindu Americans accept reincarnation, some simplified version of the Advaita philosophy, the nonduality of Self and God, and the belief that there are countless paths to Truth.

What I needed from a religion was a context and worldview through which I could work towards a direct experience or perception of the Self, God, and the Supreme Truth. Hinduism offers the means to attain these goals. Although the temple I go to is suffused with an Indian culture distinct from my own, Hinduism allows me to pursue eternal principles, transcending the categories of Indian, Western or American.

PARTHA J. MILLER, 37, is a history professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia.



PUBLISHER'S DESK

Hinduism: Religion or Way of Life?

Our publisher confronts a long-standing misapprehension about our faith, showing us why Hinduism is more than a way of life

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

"ISN'T HINDUISM SIMPLY A WAY OF LIFE?"

This is a question I am frequently asked at satsang gatherings. It invariably makes for spirited discussion, as there is avid interest and a lively diversity of opinion. Years ago, Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, gave a dramatic lecture on the subject (bit.ly/hinduism-way-of-life). Here are key excerpts: "Hinduism is not a religion. It is a way of life." You can today hear it in every drawing room wherever youngsters are sitting and discussing Hindu culture and India. You can hear them blabbering this quotation: 'Hinduism is totally different; it is not a religion. Then what is it? It is a way of life.' This is a false statement! No thinking man will accept it or give it any credit at all. What an abominable stupidity is wrapped up in such an attractive sentence! 'Hinduism is not a religion; it is a way of life.' Oh! I see! And Christianity? It is a religion? Oh! So it is not a way of life? What is religion without a way of life? How can there be a way of life without religion? Think! It is a self-contradiction to say it is not a religion; it is a way of life. If Hinduism is not a religion, it is only a way of life; then Christianity is a religion and therefore no way of life. What is religion without a way of life? Does not a religion guide us in our world, in our life? So, it is an empty, high-sounding statement."

Swamiji goes on to explain that the notion originated with German Indologists who, in the late 1800s, translated the word *mata* as religion: "The Germans, who first tried to translate our Sanskrit literature, unfortunately made a great mistake. They used *mata* for religion: 'Buddha mata,' the religion of Buddha; 'Christava mata,' the religion of Christ; 'Muhammediya mata,' Islam. Then they came to Hindu mata, and the poor Germans got confused, because in the Hindu religion there are very many mata. It is a composite mata. Mata comes from the Sanskrit word *mati*, meaning 'buddhi,' 'intellect.' That which is crystallized in the intellect is called a mata. *Mata* only means an opinion! Hindu religion contains Shankara mata, Ramanuja mata, Madhva mata. Various acharyas who have given various viewpoints of life, and the attitudes or the thoughts of the *Upanishads*—they are all called mata, mata, mata. So [the Germans] they came to the conclusion that Hinduism is not a religion. Then, what is it [they wondered]? It is 'the way of life!'"

Hindus inquiring about the merits of this infamous statement are generally not immersed in the practice of Hinduism. They may have in mind that the sum total of Hinduism is to follow dharma, to live virtuously and fulfill one's duty, and that there is no need to do more.

Hinduism is a way of life, but it is a spiritual way of life, encompassing good conduct, worship, selfless service, scriptural study and meditation. And what is the definition of a spiritual way of life?



Religion!

While Sanatana Dharma is, as the Germans observed, a family of faiths, it also stands strong and proud as a religion in its own right. These faiths all share certain common elements of culture, liturgy, scripture and basic philosophy as reflected in the core beliefs: karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity and more. Hinduism gloriously fulfills all the qualities of a religion in every sense of the word.

Remember, the Germans were no friends of Hinduism. Their redefinition of our faith as a non-religion was a powerful criticism, one that unfortunately Hindus themselves adopted. It is intellectual suicide and a global public relations disaster to deny that our faith is a religion. Hinduism stands proudly with the great faiths of the world, and it does this not because it is a way of

life. Vegetarianism is a way of life. Nonviolence is a way of life. But neither is a religion and neither will be invited to a parliament of the world's religions, as Swami Vivekananda was back in 1893. He was invited and he spoke to the world from that Chicago podium precisely because he was a Hindu.

Yes, there are those who think using the "H-word" demeans something. But they are wrong. They are neglecting the import of the word *religion* on the global stage as well as in the local community, among other faith groups. Standing together under the banner of Hinduism, we enjoy the many protections given to religions, and we have a respected, unified voice to the media, to government, to boards of education and planning departments. We have known quasi-Hindu groups who normally refuse to use the H word, but eagerly adopt it when they seek credibility in the broader community, such as in court cases.

Hinduism's finest future is to stand side-by-side with other religions, not other ways of life. Hindus who parrot the notion that Hinduism is not a religion are not serving Sanatana Dharma well. They have failed to see how wrong-headed this posturing looks in the eyes of the world. What if the Muslims claimed Islam is not a religion but just a way of life? Or Christianity? Judaism? They don't do that. They are proud of their spiritual identity. But for various reasons, including the persistent nuisance of the colonized mind, Hindus hold on to this self-destructive fallacy. Numerous swamis who established movements in the West in the mid 20th century perpetuated this idea as a means to teach Vedanta, yoga and meditation to Christians and Jews without provoking religious objections. As a result, such concepts have become household words but without being acknowledged as Hindu. Swami Chinmayananda said it so well: "It is an empty, high-sounding statement." One we can all avoid.

Happily, this is changing in small but important ways. The Hindu



youth we encounter today are proud of their religion, eager to learn more about it. In universities the world over, Hindu students want to stand proudly side-by-side with students of other religions. The Hindu American Foundation's "Take Back Yoga" campaign, which works to reestablish the practice as having its roots in the world's oldest faith, is a bold indictment of the "way of life" argument.

In each satsang I hold, one basic question invariably arises: "How can I make Hinduism practical in daily life?" I stress that to know and practice Hinduism in the fullest sense, one should engage in all the areas it encompasses: dharma, worship, selfless service, philosophical study and meditation. Together these five make for a complete physical, mental, emotional and spiritual regimen to follow throughout life.

Devotional practice without philosophy can easily turn into superstition. Philosophy without devotion and selfless service can devolve to mere intellectual argumentation and speculation. Taking Hinduism as only a way of life, one misses out on the inner benefits of devotion and philosophy. And without meditation, one has no way to experience the oneness of atman and Brahman, of jiva and Siva, which leads to illumination and liberation. Let's look at these five layers more closely.

Dharma is the foundation of Hindu religion, as capsulated in the code of conduct called *yamas*. *Yama* means "reining in" or "controlling" the base, instinctive nature, such as the tendency to become angry and harm others, to lie or manipulate events in our favor, and to steal to acquire something we desire and otherwise could not have. Such expressions of one's instinctive nature need to be harnessed, as actions based on them create negative karma and keep one constantly in an upset state of mind. Dharma also includes a wide array of cultural observances.

Seva, selfless service, is the next facet of Hindu practice. Many in-

dividuals serve through giving a monetary donation to a religious or other nonprofit organization. While it is easy to open your wallet or purse and give, say, \$50, selfless service offers a more serious commitment, requiring the sacrifice of one's time. Selfless service need not be limited to the temple; it can be done at work, at school, wherever we are in the world.

Devotional practices, such as attending puja at a temple, going on pilgrimage, conducting puja in one's home shrine and repeating a mantra on japa beads, deepen humility and raise the subtle energies to the higher chakras of cognition and divine love.

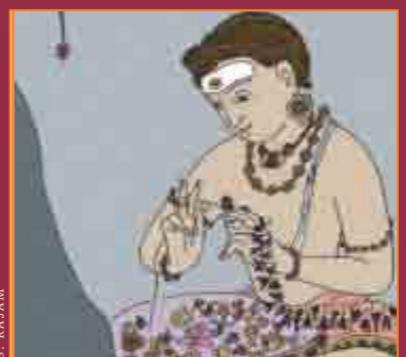
Scriptural study builds a firm foundation of philosophical clarity, an accurate understanding of God, souls and world that enhances and informs every aspect of one's life. Such study includes the *vedas*, *Agamas*, the texts of one's denomination and the teachings of the saints and sages of one's guru lineage. Choice of study material should be in consonance with one's sectarian philosophy. For example, if one's lineage is advaitic, that study should reinforce the idea that we are already one with God, that nothing has to happen for this to be true.

Meditation and other yogic sadhanas, the fifth aspect of Hinduism, are the doorway to personal realization. Meditation can propel the individual beyond philosophical concepts about Divinity to actual experience of those truths. This can be compared to reading about the taste of a ripe, juicy mango versus actually taking your first bite. Which would you prefer? There are two primary approaches. The first, raja yoga, consists of regulated breathing, sense withdrawal, concentration and meditation. The second, jnana yoga, is a path of scriptural study, reflection and constant, profound meditation.

These five religious dimensions are found in all of Hinduism's diverse lineages, with each sect and sampradaya treasuring and preserving its own cultural, devotional and philosophical uniqueness.

Five Facets Of Faith

In essence, Hinduism is a spiritual way of life, a full-fledged religion consisting of five key elements: dharma, worship, selfless service, philosophical study and sadhana/meditation.



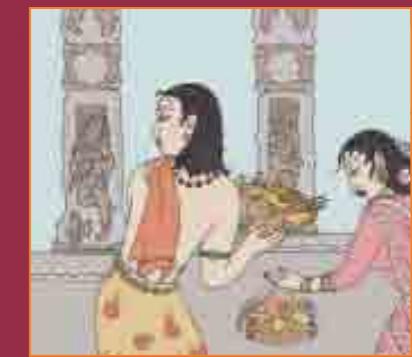
3. Selfless Service



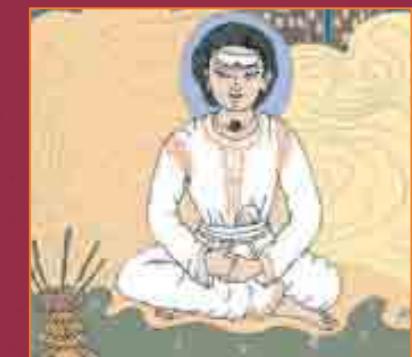
1. Dharma, Culture



4. Philosophical Study



2. Worship, Devotion



5. Sadhana & Meditation



LETTERS

A Wonderful Issue

Thank you very much for the recent issue (Jan/Feb/Mar 2013) which featured the Chitrapur Math article and also a page distilling Sri Sadyojat Shankarashram Swamiji's message. The invaluable cover story on Swami Vivekananda and the vast informative content of this particular issue truly makes it a collector's item. I am extremely grateful that you chose to include the Math in this edition of your priceless journal. I saw the hand of the Divine at play when I first glimpsed Swami Vivekananda on the cover, because he was the idol our Swamiji had when at age 20 he decided to take sannyas. The layout of the feature and the pages of Swamiji's teachings are also truly wonderful.

An Exquisite Publication

Namaste and congratulations! Your HINDUISM TODAY magazine is a high-quality publication with excellent articles and exquisite art work. Focusing on Vivekananda in your latest issue is most timely and welcome. I'd very much like to subscribe, but am still in my "wandering stage" and would first have to settle down. I hope that my wanderings will take me your way someday so that I can spend some time in close proximity to the monastery. Thankfully, with best wishes

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To find a story on Parvathy Baul along with the gatefold picture of her was another blessing. Singing bhakti music, chants and bhajans has always given me tremendous joy. I have often felt no other sadhana yields as much ecstasy. Please convey my heartfelt gratitude to all those who helped create this perfect synchronization of matter and manner.

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Moving Forward

The salvation of the current lot of the Hindu people in India depends upon the attainment of ideals of cooperation, discovery of fundamental truths of this universe and their application to further the well-being of body, mind and soul. I believe the Hindu people need to organize a scientific think-tank to move them in this direction. This association must be free from the bias found in Western knowledge. Only new, freethinking cooperation at this level will break in the next illuminating dawn, not just for Hindus, but for all mankind.

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Tagore and Einstein

I was in a different world while reading the dialogue between these two great minds (Oct/Nov/Dec 2012). They differed greatly on their views relating to the superior force guiding our destinies. Gurudev Tagore completely surrendered to God. He states "We are living in God." He touched God in all his songs. To Einstein, the word God is, "a product of human weakness," as he said in his famous *God Letter*. The two were poles apart, but their 1930 dialogue provides a fascinating philosophical read.

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resources to move forward. I feel very little guidance is offered to people like me who are lost and struggling to find meaning in lives full of guilt, ambiguity and longing. Spiritual leaders remain relatively silent on the matter. Our communities and families make us feel ashamed. So where do we turn? What we need is clear and unambiguous guidance from our swamijis, elders and leaders. If we are living dishonest and unfulfilled lives, we are drifting into immorality, self-destruction and loneliness. We must be offered a practical model for a dignified life. Has Hindu dharma been written only for heterosexuals and those with the spiritual maturity to renounce?

ANONYMOUS
UNITED KINGDOM

Keerimalai

My humble vanakkam to the monastery. Thank you for your informative article on Keerimalai (Oct/Nov/Dec, 2012). When I looked at the pictures, warm memories surfaced to my mind. Several times I bathed in the tank during my childhood days, unaware of the healing properties of that spring water. An elderly man once told me both the rising and setting of the sun can be viewed from Keerimalai seaside.

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On Time

I read with interest Arvind Sharma's article, "Time: Our Hindu View" (Jan/Feb/Mar 2013). It is indeed true that while the scientific view of time is linear, the Hindu view of time is cyclical. According to Hinduism, Brahma is the totality of the universe in which we live. The life of Brahma is 100 universal years of Brahma, after which the universe is reabsorbed and then begins again. A new Brahma is born. If you do the math, the current age of the universe, that is, of Brahma, would be about 155,522 billion years. Modern science has predicted the age of our universe to be only about 15-20 billion years! So either science still has a way to go, or it is judging the age of the universe based on the fraction of it that is known, which may function in shorter cycles than the totality of the universe that is mentioned in Hindu scripture. If we assume life on Earth to be the number of years already spent in the current day of Brahma, then life on Earth is about 2 billion years old. This is close to what current theories propose. Carl Sagan, the famous astrophysicist, said it well, "The Hindu religion is the only one of the world's great faiths dedicated to the idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes an immense,

ANONYMOUS
MALAYSIA

Guidance Needed

I'm a follower of HINDUISM TODAY. I recently read the January 2013 edition. While I really admire and value the cutting-edge and contemporary nature of the material in every edition, I couldn't help but be disappointed by the article on ashrama dharma. Whilst the writer interprets the four ashramas and their implications for modern Hindus, I feel that as a gay man, the article had no relevance for me. For most gay Hindus, life's options are few. One can marry and live dishonestly, become a life-long celibate (suitable for only a few advanced souls) or join the modern gay scene, which offers nothing more than sex, drugs and promiscuity. Now in my late 20s, with very little family support for my sexuality, I envy my heterosexual Hindu peers who are supported by an entire community, finding meaningful soulmates. I, too, want a soulmate and companion, but do not have the

indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths. It is the only religion in which the time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology. Its cycles run from our Julian year as important. Even the midnight puja is not prohibited in the *Agamas*. In fact, it is well and good to perform the worship at midnight. What about Maha Sivaratri? Midnight worship is happily done on that occasion. It is included among the worship-system of six, seven and eight sessions. In fact, this puja at the midnight of December 31st enables the people to direct their attention and works towards Divine aspects and Divinities, instead of wasting their time in clubs and parties drinking. Instead of finding fault with such worship, they should advise people not to indulge in such activities, which truly reflect the Western culture.

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OK to Celebrate the New Year

The Hindu Press International report of December 31, 2012, quotes an article that appeared in the *Daily Pioneer* datelined Chennai, regarding midnight worship in temples on December 31st. The views expressed in that article by Unnikrishna Panicker and the leader of the Hindu People's Party that "it is a sin to perform midnight pujas in temples," are baseless, beyond doubt.

To celebrate the commencement of a New Year, which occurs in various systems of time cycles, in Hindu temples is not at all wrong. It is not violating the Agamic rules. Such celebration comes under the *naimittika* type of worship. There are three types of worship—*nitya* (daily), *naimittika* (occasional) and *kamya* (optional). Worship being done on important occasions falls under *naimittika*.

Since temple worship is meant for the welfare of the whole world, there is nothing wrong in considering the beginning of the Julian year as important. Even the midnight puja is not prohibited in the *Agamas*. In fact, it is well and good to perform the worship at midnight. What about Maha Sivaratri? Midnight worship is happily done on that occasion. It is included among the worship-system of six, seven and eight sessions. In fact, this puja at the midnight of December 31st enables the people to direct their attention and works towards Divine aspects and Divinities, instead of wasting their time in clubs and parties drinking. Instead of finding fault with such worship, they should advise people not to indulge in such activities, which truly reflect the Western culture.

It was in the year 1917 that Sri Vallimalai Swami, a great Siddha, started the Pati Utsava (Steps Festival) at Tiruttani, one of the six sacred places of Lord Skanda. In his time, people used to go to the residence of the British masters on the eve of every New Year, bow down before them, offer gifts then return home. This great Siddha advised the devotees: "See, our Supreme Lord is Skanda only. Why are you going to these earthly masters on the midnight of December 31st? Turn your attention and go to the shrine of our Supreme Lord at Tiruttani on the eve of every Julian New Year. Let us join together, climb the steps one

by one, singing one Tiruppugal song at each step. Reach the shrine at midnight and perform abhisheka and aradhana to Lord Skanda for the benefit of the world, be blessed by Him and distribute His blessings to all the people."

Taking his advice, about 1,000 devotees assembled to climb the steps. Led by Vallimalai Swami, they climbed the hill, singing a Tiruppugal song at each step and then performed worship at midnight. The following year, the number of devotees increased dramatically, to one hundred thousand! This Step Festival still continues. Now, about five hundred thousand devotees take part! The mission of the great Siddha is being fulfilled perfectly. Such should be the views today's leaders. They should think in and hold wider perspectives.

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or visit: www.hinduismtoday.com/letters

Letters may be edited for space and clarity and may appear in electronic versions of HINDUISM TODAY.

Indescribable Joy that No Money Can Give

How to help parents give precious life tools to their children

I HAVE PLENTY OF SPARE TIME," DECLares Dr. Shridhar Kotta, a physician with 18 years of practice, "and I use it well." He, his wife and two boys have minimized TV, internet, emails, etc., in favor of "something better in life."

"We have fun," he explains, "We go for walks, we play tennis, sit together and talk, often about our beliefs. It's peaceful. It's wonderful." In today's busy world, how is this possible?

They have one advantage: they live in a quiet, easy-going border town, Harlington, Texas. And, because there are few Hindus and no temples nearby, the Kottas have had to hunker down and depend on themselves for their inner life—a challenge that has proved strengthening.

Then in 2000, HINDUISM TODAY came in a magical way to fill the gap. "The magazine reconnected us, and inspired in us a greater love of God and the Gods. It's brought us indescribable joy that no money can give."

"Our boys, Hari, 15, and Neil, 12, have been

doing their home puja daily for four years, now, and doing extremely well in school—all without any prodding from us. This is the power of mantra, I am sure. Each Saturday they memorize slokas from Gurudeva [founder of HINDUISM TODAY]. On Sundays we chat about the teachings; I want to be sure they understand. This will sustain them their whole life." From the time Neil was in first grade, their teachers ask them to tell the class about Hinduism and Hindu practices. "The boys are happy, self-confident and proud of their culture."

Every year, Jothi and Shridhar make a most generous donation to the Hinduism Today Production Fund, which is a part of Hindu Heritage Endowment. "We are grateful and pray the magazine will grow and grow so that more parents will be inspired to share what children need to live a good life."

If you share the Kottas' vision and enthusiasm, please donate—now or in your estate plan—to the Hinduism Today Production



The Kotta family: "We read about the people who support the fund and feel they live next door, so close are they to us."

• • • • •

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QUOTES & QUIPS

“Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers but to be fearless when facing them.”

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

When I look inside and see I am nothing, that is wisdom. When I look outside and see I am everything, that is love. **Nisargadatta Maharaj** (1897-1981), Hindu spiritual teacher

A language is something infinitely greater than grammar and philology. It is the poetic testament of the genius of a race and a culture, and the living embodiment of the thoughts and fancies that have molded them. **Jawaharlal Nehru** (1889-1964), first Prime Minister of independent India

Greater than a thousand ghee offerings consumed in sacrificial fires is to not sacrifice and consume any living creature. *Tirukural* 259

Love, love, love—that is what life is about. Study, pray, meditate, but love, love, love—that is what life is about. All scriptures

sing of love. All saints roar of love. All the known prophets continuously demonstrate love. **Swami Chinmayananda** (1916-1993), founder of Chinmaya Mission

Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment. **Will Rogers** (1879-1935), American actor and humorist

The wise man should merge his speech in his mind and his mind in his intellect. He should merge his intellect in the Cosmic Mind and the Cosmic Mind in the Tranquil Self. *Katha Upanishad* 1.3.13

Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars. **Kahlil Gibran** (1883-1931), Lebanese-American writer

Wisdom ceases to be wisdom when it becomes too proud to weep, too grave to

DID YOU KNOW?

Rajagopura, Mountain of the Gods

WHILE SOME ARE HUMBLE AND small, others tower over the horizon. The rajagopura is truly a sight to behold. These structures adorn most South Indian temples as their tallest element, built above the main entryway. They are layered towers, made of plaster and painted, or more rarely of stone, with hundreds of ornate sculptures on every side.

The term *gopura* is derived from the Sanskrit words *go* and *pura*. *Pura* refers to a raised or elevated grand structure which serves as an auspicious location for the presence of *go*—naming an assemblage of cosmic Lords, Gods, Deities, liberated sages or

I make friends of them? **Abraham Lincoln** (1809-1865), US President

When you submit yourself to the Divine, where is the need of melody and rhythm? **Paravathy Baul**, singer and musician, when asked if she had any formal musical training

Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken. **Oscar Wilde** (1854-1900), Irish writer and poet

Two men please God—one who serves Him with all his heart because he knows Him; and one who seeks Him with all his heart because he knows Him not. **Nikita Ivanovich Panin** (1718-1783), Russian author

Am I not destroying my enemies when



SHUTTERSTOCK

other great souls. *Raja* names that which is “exceedingly effulgent.” Thus, *rajagopura* precisely means “the resplendent superstructure housing hosts of Gods and Deities.” The rajagopura is a symbol of the transcendental Mount Kailasa, the eternal Himalayan abode of Lord Siva. The ornamental structures and images seen on its four sides represent the higher, supreme souls residing on the four sides of Mount Kailasa. On the east side of Kailasa are the Indras of bygone ages. On the south, Lord Dakshinamurti, Virabhadra and other Lords are present. Vishnu and His incarnations are present on the west side, while Brahma and the great sages reside on the north side.



laugh, and too self-full to seek other than itself. **Kabir** (1440-1518), mystic Indian poet

India is to me the dearest country in the world, because I have discovered goodness in it. It has been subject to foreign rule, it is true. But the status of a slave is preferable to that of a slave holder. **Mahatma Gandhi**

The true state of meditation is oneness of the meditator with the object of meditation, God. **Paramahansa Yogananda** (1893-1952), founder of Self-Realization Fellowship

It is not what you look at that matters, it's what you see. **Henry David Thoreau** (1817-1862), American author and poet

So great is glory gained by men in this world that celestials cease praising ascended sages. *Tirukural* 234

In ancient India, the intention to discover truth was so consuming that in the process, they discovered perhaps the most perfect tool for fulfilling such a search that the world has ever known—the Sanskrit language. **Rick Briggs**, NASA researcher

What for do we need a book? The whole spiritual truth, every Shastra, is secret in the human heart. **Sita Ram Goel** (1921-2003), Indian political commentator

Never think there is anything impossible for the soul. It is the greatest heresy to think so. If there is sin, this is the only sin—to say that you are weak, or others are weak. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863-1902)

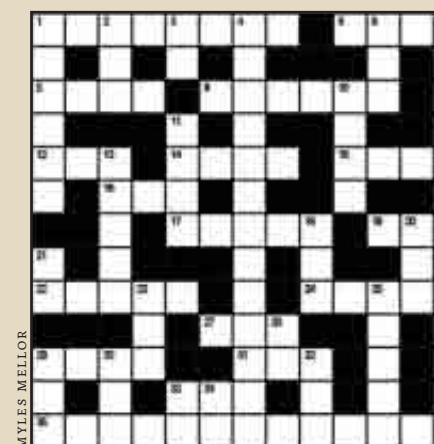
Many Western ideals and goals are based on the underlying attitude that there is only one life—so we had better do everything we can in this life. We had better achieve God Realization in this life, just in case. The Hindu attitude, based on the confidence that we have many lives, is: “I know I’m coming back; no rush. I will do as much as I can in this lifetime, and there will be ample time for further advancement.” **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**



In the final analysis we are all doing exactly as we want, as we must, doing what is next on our personal path of evolution. Nothing is wrong. Nothing should be that is not. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927-2001)

4. Famous pilgrimage in Kashmir state
6. It has less oxygen as you climb
7. Second ice Lingam regarded as a Goddess of the same name
10. Snakes
11. Agile
13. Hindu monk
18. Shape of a rainbow
20. Goal
21. You go ___ to reach the cave
23. State
25. Freezing over
26. Flower
28. Between you and ___
29. Ap kaisi ___?
30. Stretch out to rest
32. ___ va: an individual soul
33. Yes, respectfully in Hindi
34. ___atar: manifestation of a Deity in bodily form on earth

Crossword: Amarnath Cave



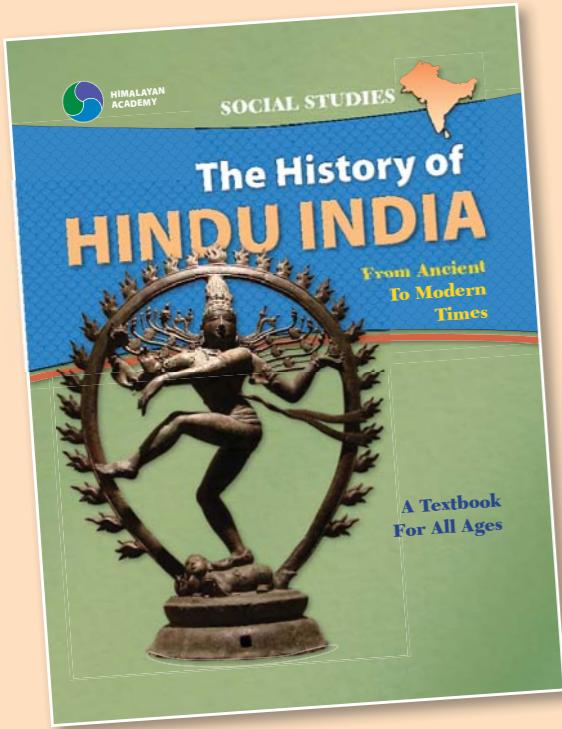
Across

1. Nearest city to the Amarnath cave; most pilgrims start from here
5. Temporary stop along the way
8. Name of the Muslim who rediscovered the cave in modern times
9. Huge kitchen set up for pilgrims along the route

Down

1. Yield
2. At the end of a word, it means believer
3. Indefinite article

Crossword answers may be more than one word and are derived from this issue's articles. For answers and an interactive online version visit: bit.ly/apr13crossword



Finally, a Fair & Accurate Presentation of Hindu History for Children

A 128-page sixth-grade social studies course from the editors of HINDUISM TODAY

HINDUISM TODAY's Hindu history book is both correct and authentic, and definitely better than I have seen in any school textbook. If each Hindu were to learn and remember this narrative, the Hindu community would be better off in this increasingly pluralistic society.

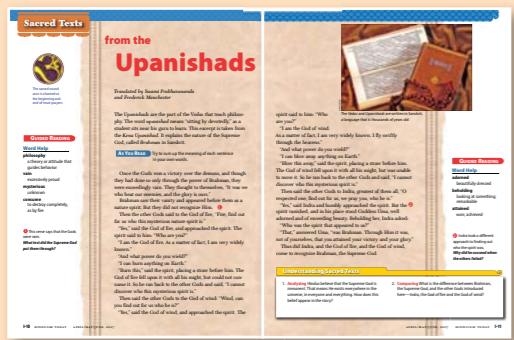
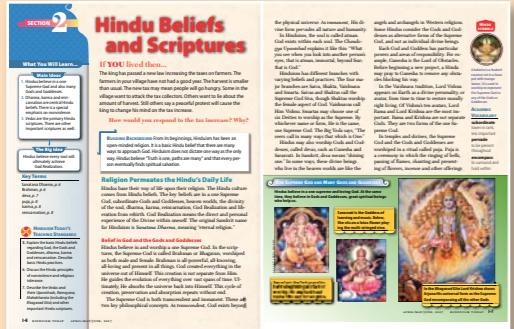
Shiva G. Bajpai, Professor Emeritus, California State University Northridge

While no book can possibly encompass fully the breadth, complexity and plurality of Hindu practice and belief, the Hindu American Foundation finds that this work compromises little in describing the universal ideals of Hinduism that have emerged from its wondrous diversity.

Hindu American Foundation, USA

This presentation provides a needed counterbalance to textbooks on Hinduism which are sometimes inaccurate or fail to give a perspective that would be recognizable to most Hindus. Though designed for sixth-graders, I could imagine myself recommending it as review material for my college students.

Jeffery D. Long, Ph.D, Chair, Department of Religious Studies, Elizabethtown College, PA, USA



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FROM THE AGAMAS

On Personal and Public Worship

Exploring the outer and inner ritual in reverence to the Sivalinga

The following is a lucid translation of passages from the Kamika Agama, chapter 4, verses 1 to 16 and 178 to 182. In the former, Siva discusses both personal and public worship and the qualities of the sincere Adisaiva, while expounding the benefits and prominence of Siva puja performed in temples adhering to the Saiva Agamas. In the latter, He explains how He is to be invoked by the pujari during public worship.

Now I will explain the systematic process of siva worship, which is efficacious in yielding worldly enjoyments as well as final liberation. Siva worship is of two kinds—*atmartha* (personal worship) and *parartha* (public worship).

Athmartha puja is personal worship being done for the Linga, graciously given to the disciple by the guru at the completion of the qualifying initiation, or for the Linga made of earth and other substances. Since it grants its fruits to the disciple as desired by him, it qualifies as personal worship.

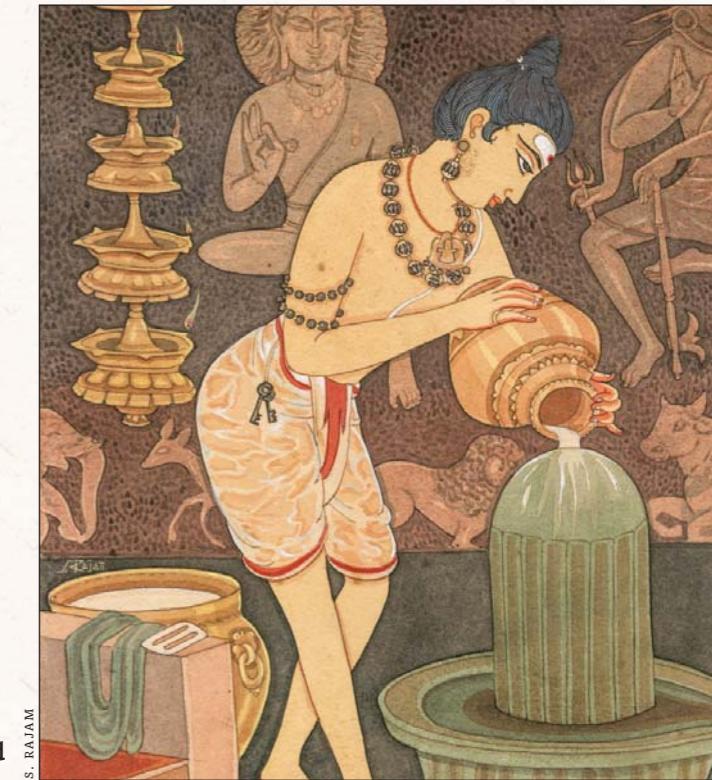
The **parartha** puja is performed for the longevity, health, victory and abundance of wealth for the ruler, and for the many-faceted growth of the village and other settlements. Parartha puja [in the Siva temple built and run according to Agamas] should be performed daily by the Adisaiva priests. Adisaiva is supreme among the twice-borns. He is virtuous, being always inclined to obey the directions given by Lord Siva. Such an Adisaiva should perform the daily temple worship. Performance of public worship in the Agama-based Siva Temples by the persons other than the Adisaivas would result in hardships for human society.

An Adisaiva is one who is well learned and has been given the supreme Siva diksha, blessed and empowered by means of ceremonial ablution. Such a person is always under Siva's command. If parartha puja is performed by such an Adisaiva, there will be no defect in that worship.

Invocation of Siva Within

With regard to the process of invoking the Lord, Isvara, the pujari should design an inner shrine within his heart. Then he should arrange for a suitable seat in a manner that is explained here. He should invoke the Lord and worship him mentally, offering sandal-wood paste and other substances. In the fire-pit which has appeared, self-installed in his navel, he should offer oblations of supreme nectarean drops. Through the regulated flow of inbreath, he should kindle the fire-pit in the navel. Elevating himself to the midpoint between the eyebrows, he should meditate on the magnificent Sivalinga which has the resplendence of pure crystal.

Contemplating the perfect state of oneness with that Linga and meditating on Lord Siva who is present within that Linga, he should breath in through the left channel (ida nadi). Such actions are considered to be the worship of Siva. Then he should offer the oblations of the nectar of consciousness through the outbreak of the right channel (pingala nadi). Having inhaled the prana and causing it to enter the muladhara chakra, he should raise his self upwards



Public puja: An Adisaiva priest performs worship of the Sivalinga for the benefit of the community and the ruler

through the outbreak, cutting asunder the inner knots and their roots. Once again, he should inhale the prana through the ida nadi and raise his self to the midpoint between the eyebrows. There he should meditate constantly on Lord Siva.

The Importance of Siva Worship

Maintaining the sacrificial fire in one's own house, systematic study of the Vedas, performing sacrifices involving many kinds of offerings in great measure—all these activities do not equal even one part out of a million parts of the greatness of worshiping the Sivalinga. By failing to worship Lord Siva, a person becomes malicious to his own self, roaming through this worldly life in a great ocean of misery for a very long time. Not having worshiped Lord Siva, one should not take his daily meals. It is more meritorious to give up one's breath or cut one's own head than failing to worship Lord Siva. Having known this truth, one must worship Him, taking all efforts.

Dr. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, of the Adisaiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the Vedas, Agamas and Shilpa Shastras. This excerpt is from his recent translation of the Kamika Agama.

Nearly a Million Climb to 13,000 Feet to Worship in Siva's Ice Cave

EACH SPRING WHEN THE SNOW ABOVE AMARNATH Cave begins to melt, some of it finds its way into the chamber beneath. There it refreezes in a huge ice stalagmite as tall as 14 feet. To Hindus, this is an auspicious Swayambhu Sivalingam, a naturally created murti, as worshipful as the most sacred Deity in any of India's great temples. It is a cherished pilgrimage destination.

In 2012 some 700,000 pilgrims worshiped at the remote cave, almost 13,000 feet above sea level. The majority took the short route from Baltal, many by helicopter, but nearly half hiked 27 kilometers through the rugged mountains from Nunwan Base Camp outside Chandanwari.

Documenting this pilgrimage in a devotional and insightful manner has been a longtime goal of Hinduism Today. Last year we assigned our Delhi correspondent, Rajiv Malik, and photographer Sudharak Olwe of Mumbai to personally undertake the long, hard trek from Nunwan. They interviewed dozens of participants, from Hindu pilgrims and government officials to Muslim shopkeepers and pony wallahs without whom the pilgrimage would be impossible. It was a grueling ordeal for the city-based team, who suffered greatly from the altitude and exposure to the sun, wind and cold. Here is their report of this extraordinary adventure.

Hindus in ever-increasing numbers make the strenuous yearly trek high into the mountains of Kashmir



Destination: Pilgrims first glimpse the sacred cave (center, in the cliff) as they approach the tent city at its base; (inset) artist's rendering of the ice Sivalingam



BY RAJIV MALIK, NEW DELHI

PLANS FOR OUR PILGRIMAGE TO Amarnath Cave are in their infancy when a raging controversy erupts over the dates. Several prominent Hindu organizations want the start date moved to the beginning of June. They want to allow more days for the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to reach the holy cave and worship at the natural ice Sivalingam which manifests there each year. Citing pilgrims' safety, the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board and the Jammu and Kashmir State Government prevail. The high-altitude trek is scheduled to start in late June after the weather has improved.

Photographer Sudharak Olwe and I have been instructed to opt for the full pilgrimage experience on foot, trekking 27 kilometers from Chandanwari. For the return, we will take the short route, 14 km to Batal and back to Srinagar. Many pilgrims these days go to Batal and take a helicopter to within a short distance of the cave, but we want to join the throng walking the long route. Then we would stay several days in Srinagar for interviews, especially with Chari Mubarak Mahant [see page 23], whose lineage is long associated with the pilgrimage.

Preparations

Our first hurdle is obtaining official permission to cover the pilgrimage as journalists—and to photograph the ice Sivalingam, which is normally prohibited. There is no formal system for getting accreditation, but finally our friend Tarun Vijay helps connect us with Sri Navin Choudhary, private secretary of the governor of Jammu and Kashmir and CEO

of the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board, who assures us of all needed assistance. This executive help, and some divine intervention, will enable us to fulfill our mission, even getting pictures at the holy cave.

The yatra's official website, amarnathyatra.org, contains all the information needed, including how to register, how to prepare, what to wear and carry—even how to optimize the spiritual benefit of the pilgrimage: keep a pious mind and chant "Om Namah Shivaya" all the way.

As recommended, I improve my physical condition by walking a hour daily for more than a month in advance. After speaking with a dozen people who have made the journey before, I make a detailed list of the items we need—mostly basic trekking supplies such as shoes, woolens and hats. These can be obtained dearly at the adventure-tourist stores, or reasonably at the shops in Delhi's military cantonment area.

By the first week of May, the yatra dates are finalized: the 39 days from June 25 to August 2. Now we can book tickets and proceed with registration through the Jammu and Kashmir Bank, which is authorized by the Shrine Board to issue permits for a nominal fee of 15 rupees. One can also register online or at designated post offices.

We engage a travel agency, Enjoy Unlimited in Jammu, to arrange ticketing and local transport from Srinagar to Pahalgam and then back from Batal to Srinagar. A guide will accompany us on the yatra. Lodging, meals, pony transport, etc., cannot be arranged in advance but must be handled on the spot. The guides' help was invaluable, especially after both Sudharak and I began to

suffer from altitude sickness.

Arrival in Kashmir

I land in Srinagar on June 28. The city is tense following the unsolved burning of a famous ancient Muslim *dargah* which enshrined a Sufi saint. Worried that violence could break out the next day, Friday, when the issue is bound to come up at the collective prayers, I leave early for Pahalgam and cover the 94 km in a few hours' time.

Big posters, billboards and banners welcome pilgrims to the holy Amarnath pilgrimage. These are put up by the Indian Army and paramilitary forces and by the organizations running the huge *bhandaras* or *langars*, the free feeding establishments located all along the yatra route. I check into the Hotel Senator Pine and Peak, appreciating the lush natural surroundings of the area, then savor lunch at the vegetarian restaurant Dana Pani. Its manager, Narinder Singh, tells me his business actually suffers during the yatra: most pilgrims opt for the free *bhandaras*, and tourists stay away from this popular hill resort to avoid the deluge of pilgrims.

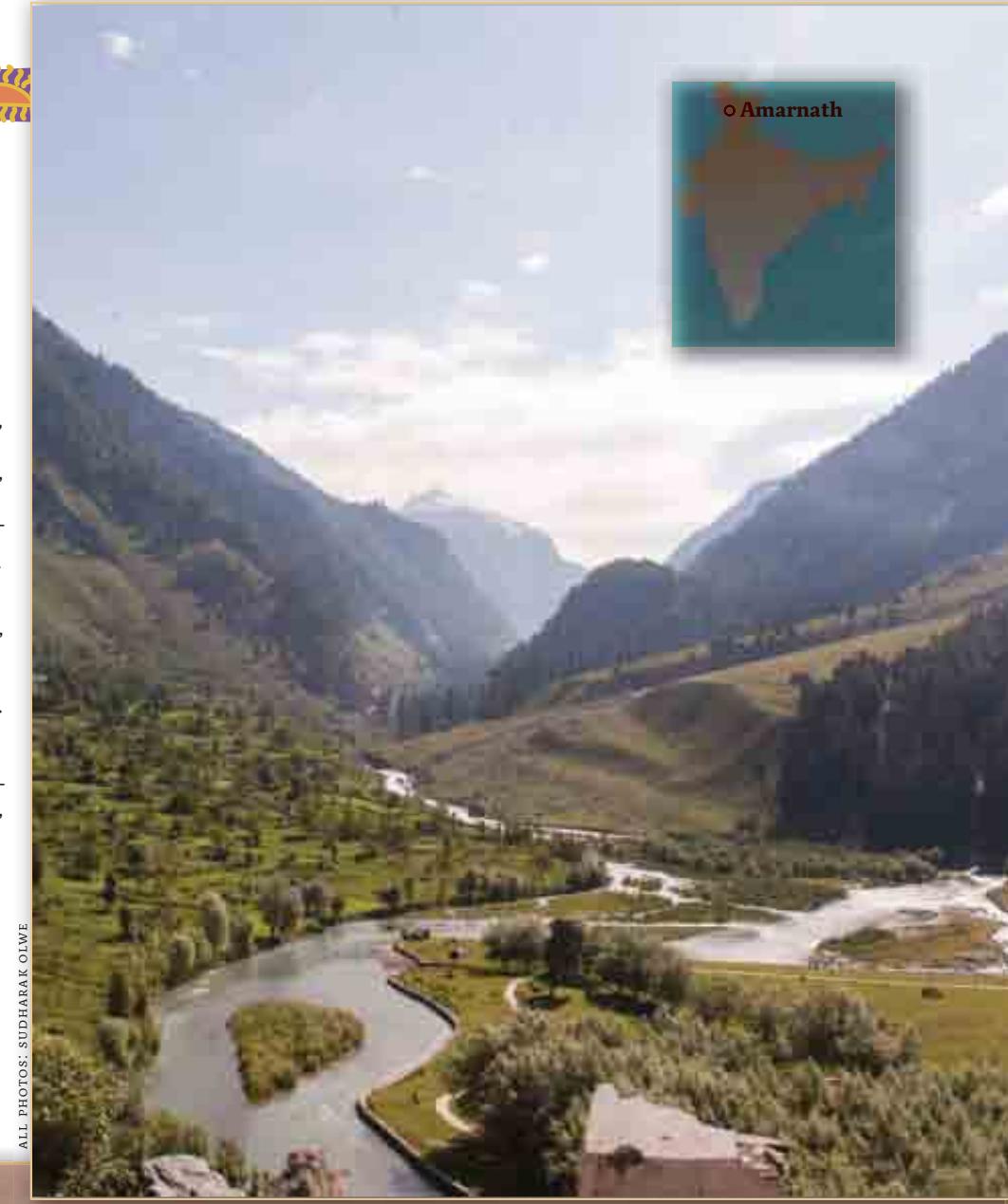
That afternoon I go to the huge Nunwan Base Camp run by the Shrine Board just outside town. It is the launch point for pilgrims taking the long foot route to the cave. Heavily fenced with barbed wire, the camp resembles a military compound. (Muslim insurgents have attacked the pilgrimage in the past.) Hundreds of public and private vehicles are parked outside the gates. Entering, I pass through metal detectors where my belongings are searched by security forces. The scene is like the major Kumbha Melas, just on a smaller scale.



The day is bright and sunny, and the entire camp bustles with activity. Pilgrims stream in from all corners of India—youth with bags hanging on their backs, and elderly folk balancing luggage on their heads. Some 7,000 pilgrims a day pass through here. Most spend the night in tents for a nominal fee; some opt for a hotel in town. Pilgrims who have not yet registered can do so here and get medical checkups as needed. The biggest rush is for mobile phone connection cards, but all who buy one are disappointed: the cards never worked during the pilgrimage, not even in Pahalgam. And the connection is valid for just seven days, making it a complete waste of money.

A huge market comprising hundreds of tent-shops offers everything a pilgrim might need for the tough journey ahead. Shoes, caps, sticks, raincoats, jackets—you name it and they have it. The quality is low and the prices high, but there is no dearth of buyers. My supplies are much better, but I had to run all over Delhi to find them.

Adjacent to the shops are the famous feeding stations. Manned mostly by volunteers, they offer a wide variety of delicious food choices, paid for with donations collected year-round in the big cities. Free feeding



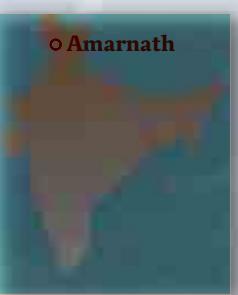
ALL PHOTOS: SUDHARAK OLWE

Auspicious and delicious: (left to right) Pilgrims line up for a lavish meal at a festive Nunwan Camp *bhandara*; pilgrimage map; the valley below Pahalgam, a jumping-off place for pilgrims and a tourist destination the rest of the year. (inset) location of Amarnath Cave in Jammu and Kashmir State.

Pilgrimage to Amarnath: Luxury Cuisine at Base Camp



ROUTE MAP: SRI AMARNATH YATRA





Beginning the Trek: a Steep and Muddy Challenge for Man and Pony Alike



(above) The trek starts off easily enough, following the valley floor, but pilgrims soon encounter this steep and muddy climb to Pissu Top; (left) pilgrims are let through in batches at the starting checkpoint—a total of six to seven thousand a day; (right) Mahant Deependra Giri, who is responsible for the ceremonial beginning and ending of the pilgrimage with the two Chari Mubarak—the sacred silver staffs to his left and right—as they were taken to the cave in 2012

ALL PHOTOS: SUDHARAK OLWE/DINDIA.COM



places can be found at many pilgrimage sites and at the Kumbha Melas, but nothing to compare with these spectacular meals. Most of the organizers are connected to the catering business in their regular life, and they run the operation expertly. There are bhan-daras all along the route to the cave, even at the highest elevations, providing complimentary meals for the complete duration of three or four days. Many of my fellow pilgrims are traveling on a total budget of under Rs. 10,000 (US\$182), including transport to and from their home town. This is possible mainly because of the free food.

Durga Das, 55, has come from Maharashtra

in a group of 85, taking the pilgrimage for the eighth time. "I am illiterate and work in a steel mill. I am a very poor man, but my family and friends help me. Once you are passionate about this pilgrimage, nothing can stop you from coming."

I return to Nunwar Camp in the evening with photographer Sudharak Olwe, who was delayed by inclement weather in Mumbai. At 8pm the place overflows with pilgrims who will spend the night in the tent facilities provided by the Shrine Board and start off in the morning to the cave. I stop at the medical tent and learn that my blood pressure is alarmingly high—the first sign that this

yatra may not go easily. I am given medicine to reduce the pressure. If I take this pilgrimage again, I will definitely spend two or three days at Pahalgam to calm down from the hectic travel and adjust to the altitude.

Late in the evening we meet the camp director, Amit Sharma, an official of the Kashmir Administrative Services. He explains the daily priority is to get the pilgrims into the government-provided vehicles and on their way to Chandanwari starting from 5 am. From there they proceed on foot or ponyback. They should arrive at the first night's camp, Sheshnag, by 6pm at the latest, as the weather can turn at any time. "Everywhere people

Yatra Voices: Mahant Deependra Giri, Keeper of the Chari Mubarak

Mahant Deependra Giri, popularly known as Chari Mubarak Swami Amarnath Ji, is the current representative of the guru lineage responsible for the beginning and ending of the Amarnath Yatra. He was interviewed by Rajiv Malik at his Srinagar headquarters.

THE STORY OF AMARNATH IS THAT MOTHER PARVATI HAD REQUESTED Lord Siva to narrate to Her the *Amar Katha*, after listening to which a human being is liberated from the cycle of birth and death. Bhagwan Shankar wanted to locate a secluded place where no unauthorized person could overhear. He proceeded upwards into the mountains, leaving His bull Nandi at Pahalgam, and told the *Amar Katha* to Parvati at the cave. Later, at Pissu Top there was a demon who used to harass pilgrims, and legend has it that Rishi Bhringish, with the blessings of Lord Siva, used these *charis* (sticks) to destroy that evil force. These sticks since then are known as Chari Mubarak, the holy mace of Lord Siva. The cave and pilgrimage route are mentioned in the scripture *Bhringish Samhita* written by the rishi.

If we go by the story, the pilgrimage has a history of over five thousand years. If we go to Maharaja Hari Singh's time, 150 years ago, there is official recorded history of it. It is commonly said that one Buta Malki discovered the cave in the 19th century. I would say he rediscovered this yatra which already existed.

This was always a snow-laden area, and it was never easy to undertake this pilgrimage. Long ago there would be 25 or 50 and then 100 or 200 pilgrims who would be undertaking this yatra. I remember in 1986 the figure of pilgrims was 26,000. For a long time it was marveled that such a large number of people had undertaken it. This time, the very second day the total number of pilgrims who had darshan at the holy cave exceeded twenty thousand. Then on June 26 alone over thirty thousand pilgrims had darshan at the cave.

Kashmir has always been a center of Saivism. This is a land of divinity and spirituality. Even the Muslim community here start their spiritual activities early in the morning. For sure, there were disturbances and the situation was not good for some time. However, things have improved now. Overall the atmosphere here is charged with spiritual energy. Anyone who wants to pursue meditation or devote time to study the scriptures will find the atmosphere here

favorable for such activities.

There is a whole chain of our predecessors from whom I received the Chari Mubarak. They are two sticks encased in silver cases to preserve them properly. We took the Chari Mubarak to Pahalgam on Ashadh Purnima, July 3, to mark the formal beginning of the yatra, then returned here. Late in July we will take the Chari Mubarak along the traditional route which you took, arriving at the holy cave on August 2, Shravan Purnima, to mark the end of the yatra. By that time, after 700,000 pilgrims have been to the cave, the Sivalingam will have melted away. So unfortunately, unlike in the past, not many people want to accompany the Chari Mubarak to the cave.

It is a matter of great concern for us that elderly people and small children are being allowed to undertake this arduous pilgrimage. In the ten days of pilgrimage so far (in 2012) thirty lives have been lost. Each yatri is supposed to obtain a medical certificate, but this is not being done properly, or not done at all. I think the people managing the show must monitor this more minutely and make people aware of the hazards they face in such high-altitude areas. They must clearly explain to them the do's and don'ts for the yatra. We have to ensure that lives are not lost in such a big way.

If a person has been given a good religious upbringing by his family and his ancestors have been devotees of

Lord Siva, whether he is in India or anywhere else in the world, when news comes about the Amarnath Yatra, he naturally wants to go. Not just the physically fit youth undertake this yatra. I have also seen aged people carrying their own luggage. When approached by others to carry their luggage, they refuse help and carry it by themselves. Because of their high level of dedication, they are able to do this and complete the yatra on their own. My own personal belief is that anyone filled with faith and devotion can undertake this yatra. But while they may be mentally ready, they must prepare on the physical level.

My message to the Hindus all over the world is that those who have undertaken this yatra already are lucky and blissful. But those who have not must pray to God to create the circumstances and means so they can at least once in their life undertake this pilgrimage to the holy cave and have the darshan of Lord Siva who manifests Himself in the form of a naturally formed ice Sivalingam.





are walking on snow. At many places the tented accommodation itself is on the snow."

In past years, Sharma says, retired officials were called into service to manage the camp, but this year it was decided to assign active, top-level, experienced officers.

He praises the bhandaras. "They are full of enthusiasm, even pulling people in asking them to have food. There is dancing and chants of Lord Siva. The level of excitement is worth experiencing. The tradition of bhandaras seems to be as old as the yatra itself. The food is not only free, it is of the highest quality." This is a service not seen elsewhere in India.

Sharma shares, "My duty is to manage the people here at Nunwan Camp. Performing this duty in a dedicated manner is a part of my devotion to the Lord. I have personally gone on this pilgrimage twice. It was an amazing experience. Standing before the ice Sivalingam, I forgot I was a part of this world. You simply feel as if you are a part of the divinity which Lord Siva has spread across the world."

We leave the camp near midnight, driven back to Pahalgam by our tired and very unhappy taxi wallah. We pay him handsomely for detaining him so late. It is our first encounter with a stark contrast in the Amarnath pilgrimage. For thousands of local Kashmiri Muslims, this is pure business. It is their livelihood, and they typically do not accept the rates published for their services by the Shrine Board. This leads to some heated misunderstandings with the yatris. In contrast, the bhandaras provide free food to hundreds of thousands of pilgrims.

The Pilgrimage Begins

We check out of our hotel in the morning and reach Chandanwari at 11 am. As we approach, we hear shouting among the drivers. There has been a stone-pelting skirmish between the security forces and the taxi drivers right at the village entrance. It is unnerving to so directly encounter the poor relations between the locals and the security forces. After things calm down, we proceed into town.

Pilgrims are shouting slogans and mantras,

Aum Namah Sivaya, Bam Bam Bole ("Chant Siva Siva!") and Jai Baba Barfani ("Hail the Ice Form of Lord Siva"), while loudspeakers blast out Siva bhajans. It is a high-energy festival atmosphere, and youth are dancing in the streets. Heading across town, we follow a narrow road lined with free bhandaras and shops selling food and last-minute travel essentials. Finally, we reach the gate marking the beginning of the pilgrimage. Soon the security people let us through in a large group and pilgrims shout "Jai Baba Barfani!"



The First Day's Climb Is Strenuous, and Beautiful



(above) These pilgrims are risking their lives by taking this shortcut near Pissu Top; (left) trail levels out toward Naga Koti; (below) Poshpatri Bhandara with a selection of dishes; (right) Navin K. Choudhary



Voices: Navin K. Choudhary, CEO, Sri Amarnath Shrine Board

In addition to heading the Shrine Board, Choudhary is the principal secretary to the Governor of Jammu and Kashmir State. We began the July 6 interview by asking for an overview of the Board's work.

THE YATRA IN GENERAL IS GOING VERY WELL. TODAY WE EXPECT TO touch 250,000, and it could reach 700,000 by the end. The Board handles the yatra dates, registration, sanitation and the Baltal route. The government handles health and power, and the army handles security. The Pahalgam route maintenance is done by the Pahalgam Development Authority. We have been continuously working to improve the route. It is fifty kilometers long. You cannot go with bulldozers and cut the mountains. It is not legal. You cannot build a fully cemented path, but still we do improvements. If you noticed, at Pissu Top and Nagakoti we have made slab staircases. If you had traveled last year at these places you would have feared slipping and falling 500 feet below. It is a continuous process, and we spend tens of millions of rupees on improvement every year in patches. We just cannot go and demolish mountains and create a twenty-foot wide track.

Starting Date Controversy

The yatra duration is determined by two factors. One is the binding factor that the yatra will conclude on Raksha Bandhan, which falls on Shravana Purnima (the full moon in July/August—which was August 2 in 2012). Now there is a demand that we start it at Jyestha Purnima (the full moon in May/June—June 4 in 2012) and end it at Raksha Bandhan. We started the yatra this year on June 25. You yourself have seen the snow on the track and other places which you cannot just manually clear. You cannot arbitrarily move back the starting date just because Raksha Bandhan falls earlier in certain years. The yatra period has to be shorter. It is next to impossible to start before the end of June. This year, even as late as June 18 we were not confident that we would be able to start on June 25.

People have to understand that this ideologically hardened stance of starting on Jyestha Purnima and ending at Shravan Purnima is impractical. To remove this controversy we formed a subcommittee and involved prominent saints such as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Swami Avdhehananda and Swami Gyaanand, together with environmentalists, security experts, the government, the army and civilians. They met all the stakeholders over a two-month period and came up with a set of parameters, including the snow removal process and other weather-related factors. They concluded that the yatra duration may vary from time to time. Based on those parameters, the Shrine Board will decide the duration of the yatra each year.

The yatra has never started successfully before the end of June or first week of July. There is no scriptural reference that says it must start on Jyestha Purnima. The Shrine Board is responsible for the safety and security of the pilgrims. You have been through the yatra and have seen the amount of snow that is still there at many places. At Mahaguna's top there is still four to five feet of snow. Thousands of laborers would be needed to remove it. At 14,000 feet their level of productivity is just one to two hours a day. If I start the yatra too early, what face will I show to my countrymen if hundreds or thou-

sands of people die? This is something which some people do not want to understand. They are just talking about ideology and are not concerned about the safety and security of the pilgrims.

Pilgrims' Health and Safety

Fifty percent of the pilgrims who have died so far this year were under forty years of age. One was a boy just 22. They come to the high altitude and start walking as if they are on the plains. We advise everyone to walk slowly and take oxygen in the case of breathlessness, but that is not happening. We introduced the compulsory health certificate, but many just casually procure it.

We extend all help in a case of an unfortunate death. At the expense of the Shrine Board, the body is brought down to the nearest base camp. We locate the family and help them fulfill all legal formalities. If someone needs financial help to carry the body to their original place, we help them. If somebody wants to cremate the body here, we offer the assistance of a pujari and a facility for the cremation. The family of those who have duly registered receive an insurance payment of Rs. 100,000 (US\$1,800).

There is no dearth of doctors, paramedical staff, oxygen cylinders and medicines. You can see them all over, at all levels. At every stage the doctors are available. However, the pilgrims must also take care of themselves. If you are seventy years of age coming on this yatra, you are yourself trying to kill yourself. Small children, old people should not come. Now this is something I cannot enforce legally. The citizens also have to be responsible for their acts. If you have any ailment or have been sick in the past few days or months, you should not come. All those who come should follow our do's and don'ts. We have given immense publicity to these things through the news channels, newspapers and our website. If you do not have the personal determination to follow it, we do not have the legal mechanism to enforce it either.

The langar wallahs are doing a great job. They are an essential part of the yatra and are important stakeholders. We are also telling them to improve certain things. For instance, some of the food they serve is not good to serve at the yatra, which is taking place at such a high altitude. We have given them a diet chart prepared by the doctors. We have been constantly telling the langar wallahs to not serve greasy or heavy food. We have been requesting them to provide food which is easily digestible at a high altitude. Some feel they have served what the yatris like and by doing so they have served them truly. But to my mind that is not a good idea. If I want to eat gajar ka halwa (the famous Punjabi sweet made with carrots), then I will jolly well eat it in Delhi or Jallandhar. I do not need gajar ka halwa at the holy cave. My body will feel better if I am given simple cooked khichadi (made of rice and lentils) which is good for my body. But this is nowhere available. I have been telling them to serve khichadi and also put up signs announcing that this is the best diet they can have at this high altitude. These are things which people have to understand themselves. These things are not a matter of regulation.



Snow Packs & Mountain Lakes Appear



ALL PHOTOS: SUDHARAK OLIVE/DINODIA.COM



Now we hire ponies for the climb. The Shrine Board has posted rates, but the pony wallahs want double. They are unruffled when I show them my copy of the rate list. For the three-day trip to the cave, the published rate one way for a pony is \$37; for a palanquin with six carriers, \$138; and for a luggage carrier, *pithoo*, with a 20-kilogram load, \$22. By comparison, a helicopter from Baltal to near the cave costs \$53 round trip.

With nowhere to complain, we pay the exorbitant rates. Such disparity prevails everywhere during the pilgrimage. If the Shrine Board wishes to enforce its published rates, it should negotiate mutually satisfactory agreements with the locals and then staff booths to manage discrepancies. Arguing with the pony wallahs and luggage carriers detracts from the spirit of the pilgrimage.

Off we go on foot with our ponies following. The luggage carriers take off ahead at their own pace. We will not see them again until nightfall at Sheshnag. Sudharak and I last a mere half an hour on foot, our bodies ill-accustomed to the oxygen-starved air. So, for the first time in our lives, we mount a pony, leaving behind the wooden sticks we bought for the journey. Collecting such abandoned sticks and selling them to the next batch of pilgrims must be a lucrative business for the locals.

Riding a pony on a steep mountain path is no joke. I am thankful I'm not overweight. Around me, heavier pilgrims struggle with

even climbing aboard. Still, I find myself an inept rider barely able to keep my balance. The pony wallah shouts "Lean forward when going up and lean back when going down," to make the ride easier and safer. I find this difficult, and together the pony wallahs rebuke me for my lack of horsemanship. Sudharak faces the added challenge of taking photographs while riding, a feat he manages with aplomb, even while going up the natural steps, or traversing the treacherous areas evident in the photos. To my astonishment, ignoring all hazards, he snaps thousands of pictures balanced on the pony with both hands on the camera.

Too heavily dressed for the warm weather, I am soon sweating, but it is impossible to take off the clothes, which include thermal underwear. At least we don't have rain or snow to contend with; the journey is challenging enough on a sunny day.

Traveling through the picturesque valley has been fairly easy, but then comes the steep and rugged climb to Pissu Top (photo page 22). Even for the seasoned pony, climbing the muddy rocks is a struggle. This stretch is terrifying. A pony ahead slips in the mud, mine rears up and snorts wildly, and the pony behind does the same. Many of us are chanting "Aum Namah Sivaya" out of sheer fear.

Sharing the poneys' path are people on foot and others being carried in a palaki (a palanquin, really just a chair strapped to two poles). The pony wallahs and palaki wallahs

A perilous trek: (left) Ponies are not allowed on this narrow stretch between Zoji Bal and Naga Koti; (below left) a group of five young pilgrims from Rajasthan on the way to Zoji Bal, with pony wallahs behind them; (right) the path crosses an ice-cold glacial stream just below a waterfall; (far right) steep, rocky sections such as this are common

shout "Bhole, Bhole!" to make way through the crowd. The path becomes so dangerous, I hire a man to support me and keep me from falling off the pony. Immune to fear, Sudharak continually takes photos.

After three hours, we complete the 35-km trek to Pissu Top. The breathtaking panorama of snow-covered mountaintops overwhelms me. Like an oasis, a huge bhandara is serving vast quantities of delicious steaming food, all from goods hauled up the same path we so perilously climbed. Around us are shops set up by locals, selling water, juice and snacks. We attempt to interview pilgrims. Our pony wallahs protest, eager to reach Sheshnag before dark. But once they understand I'm a journalist, they gather around and openly talk to me about their troubles.

They can't get good rates for their services—it is difficult to survive a year on the short yatra, which is their main source of income. Ghulam Qadri bemoans, "I'm a graduate, but still I do this because I cannot get a better job. Many of us have to borrow money to buy a pony, which costs Rs. 50,000 (us\$920). If we don't earn enough, we fall into a debt trap. The free bhandaras are only for pilgrims. They will only give us tea, even though we do hard work to help the pilgrims. We should also be entitled to food. I tell you, we will not let our children do this troublesome job, but make them study for something better." Abdul Rashid, 40, who owns a pony, says many generations of his family have provided horses for the pilgrimage. He expects to earn about \$552 this season. Miraz, 23, says he makes about \$184 each season working as a helper.

From Pissu Top we start toward Jopjal



(Zoji Bal), all the while chanting "Bam Bam Bhole" and "Jai Barfani Baba." We must personally carry any items we will need during the day's trek, since the luggage carriers go on ahead. Snow is more abundant. By the time we reach Jojpal, snow is everywhere. An old man tells me he underwent a foot operation some time ago after a major fracture but is successfully completing this pilgrimage, chanting the name of Lord Siva. Chavi, a smiling six-year-old, is having a great time walking and riding; she doesn't quite understand why the grownups are finding the going so tough. Many pilgrims speak of some constant power that helps them to keep going and overcome each challenge, no matter how difficult. These inspiring stories are nourishment for fellow pilgrims.

Bone weary when we reach the bhandaras, we are astounded to find a crowd of younger pilgrims dancing joyfully to the popular bhajan "Jai Jai Bhole Bhandari" played over a powerful music system. To them the pilgrimage is clearly less arduous!

Having studied the guidelines set by the Shrine Board I can't help but notice that some are simply ignored. Many elderly men

A high-altitude feast: (clockwise from top left) On the route from Sheshnag to Panchtarni; on the way to Amarnath Cave after passing Sangam; this boy is faring better than his parents but still needs to take a break; the huge Shri Shiv Sevak Bhandara at Poshpatri; one of the thousands of Muslim pony wallahs, palanquin bearers, luggage carriers and helpers

and women look unfit for the journey, and others seem ill-equipped for the weather. Many women are wearing saris, even if riding ponies. Adventuresome yatrasis take dangerous shortcuts along the route.

Soon we leave Jojpal and begin the day's final stretch: 35 km from Jojpal to Sheshnag. The sky is crystal clear, granting us a spectacular view of this stunning passage. We cross glaciers and ice-cold waterfalls. We pass big holes a pony could slip into. One part is treacherously steep, like the route up to Pissu Top. Here, ponies cannot make it with a rider, so all must walk. Soon exhausted, I hire a palaki for the last few hundred yards of this stretch. The rider-less ponies are taken up a different route.

Arrival at Sheshnag
It is sunset when we reach Sheshnag. After several hours on horseback, both of us are dead tired. That I have made it even this far is a miracle for a sedentary writer like me. High blood pressure, mild asthma and back problems assail my body. It could only be done with the blessings of Barfani Baba.

In what turns out to be their standard practice, the pony wallahs want to drop us a kilometer before our camp, as this is more convenient for them. Our luggage wallah has not met up with us, nor is our travel agent anywhere to be found. To top it off, there is a disturbance involving some stone pelting near the Shrine Board camp; a paramilitary person has hit a pony wallah.

Finally our guide and the luggage wallahs join us, but the pony wallahs still refuse to take us to the camp. This stalemate prevails

for 90 minutes, with our own pony wallahs shouting slogans to the paramilitaries. Night is falling, and it starts to drizzle. All the pilgrims are in the same fix due to the disturbance. The shouting subsides; our pony wallahs capitulate. They have little choice: as part of renting the ponies, they had to hand over their identity cards to us—a powerful bargaining point.

We had hoped to visit Sheshnag Lake, but it is too late in the day. We seek out the camp director, Shri Surender Mohan Sharma. He and his team are fuming about the altercation. His makeshift office was attacked—he shows us the dents in the aluminum walls. Even so, his team provide us hot tea, snacks and a small room to sleep in. Ironically, while the bhandaras provide excellent food, other essentials are lacking. Most significantly, clean toilets are not found anywhere on the route.

Sudharak and I spend a sleepless night in the cold, rainy camp. Despite our advance efforts to improve our physical condition, the altitude is affecting us greatly, much more so than our younger travel agent guide. There are no phones here, and no electricity after the generators are shut off for the night. Completely cut off from the world, we are naturally apprehensive.

Departure for Panchtarni

In the morning, Sudharak is taken for a medical checkup and given oxygen. Though neither of us is well, we have no option but to push on. It rained heavily last night and the ground is slippery with mud. Again we must go through the hassle of hiring the pony and

The Final Approach to Amarnath Cave





luggage wallahs for the next leg of our journey. Though exhausted, at least we have learned how to mount and sit easily on the pony.

Some pilgrims we see so frightened by yesterday's riding that they are back on foot today. When people walk along a narrow trail with a cliff below, they hug the mountain-side. The ponies, for unknown reasons, walk on the valley or cliff side of the trail, which is most unnerving for the hapless rider.

Now entirely in snow country, we take eight hours to cover the ten kilometers to Panchtarni. My face and neck are painfully sunburned. Toward the end of this stretch we have to climb to Mahaguna Top, which is as difficult as was Pissu Top. Sudharak is in increasingly bad shape, but there is little we can do for him—medical facilities are minimal. Our travel agent guide does the best he can for him. Still, Sudharak never stops taking photographs. The positive vibration of the throng of thousands of pilgrims in our group keeps our spirits up.

After Mahaguna Top, the journey is downhill for a while. I am eager to arrive at Poshpatri, where the bhandara is the largest and most famous of the entire yatra. Even in Delhi one sees posters and billboards advertising this place, which is managed by the Shri Shiv Sevak organization in Delhi.

Reaching Poshpatri, the sight is amazing. Hundreds of people are enjoying the food—though it is a gross understatement to call it mere food. It is a lavish party, larger and better organized than nearly any wedding party



volunteers. Each day, all the food is hauled in 21 km, along with 25 gas cylinders and 200 liters of kerosene. He said their bhandara, unlike others, does feed the pony wallahs and other laborers (at a separate window) because without them "we cannot transport a single bag of salt to this place."

We take our time here, enjoying the rest and the food, which infuriates and worries our pony wallahs. They know we must reach Panchtarni before dark. The path is treacher-

ous enough during daylight.

Arriving in Panchtarni, we have no idea where we will spend the night, as no bookings could be made in advance. One must simply use whatever space is available. Fortunately, Rajiv Rajji, back in Poshpatri, gave me some contacts here, and we are put up in a small tent holding 11 people. Once again we have an almost sleepless night as the temperature drops to freezing. Sudharak is having a tough time coping with the lack of oxygen. I am better off, though my sunburn is painful and I have a bad case of constipation, possibly from too much rich food!

From Panchtarni to Amarnath Cave

Still exhausted in the morning, we set out on this last leg of our pilgrimage. All are tired and the mood is sullen, but as we cover the six kilometers to the base of the mountain where Amarnath Cave is located, the pilgrims' faces are lit with high expectations and enthusiasm.

Once past Sangam, the path becomes more crowded, as we pass returning pilgrims who are headed out through Batal. Most who take the long route in, as we are doing, sensibly opt for the short way out. Those returning from darshan of the ice Lingam are in great spirits, greeting us warmly and sharing how blissful they feel.

Almost through this entire leg of the journey we can see the helicopters plying between Batal and Panchtarni. The weather is

sunny, and the choppers traveling through the valley every fifteen minutes seem to fascinate us all.

As we get closer and closer to the holy cave area, the chanting of mantras and slogans increases in fervor and frequency. Greetings between the arriving and departing pilgrims also become more emotionally and devotionally charged.

Five hours after leaving Panchtarni, we arrive at the huge tent city on the snow-covered valley floor just below Amarnath Cave. We take a break at one of the hundreds of shops and have a warm bath (for Rs. 50/bucket) at the river. Refreshed, we purchase prasadam for our worship and join the huge queue of pilgrims moving slowly toward the cave, chanting all the way. Waving the press cards hanging around our necks, we avoid the heavy rush by using the lane meant for those returning, which is much less crowded right now.

Then we reach the police checkpoint. They don't object to our queue jumping, but they tell us we cannot take photographs of the ice Sivalingam—one of our prime objectives from the beginning. After a great deal of discussion, name-dropping on my part and checking with higher-ups, we are allowed to proceed with the camera, on condition we do not use the flash.

The path to the cave is made of huge stones



cut out of rocks, many over a foot in height. We have to climb several hundred of these. Everywhere is the heard the name Lord Siva.

Only a few hundred pilgrims at a time are

allowed to have darshan of the Lingam. Too many at a time would warm the cave and cause the Lingam to melt sooner. Each group is allowed fifteen to thirty minutes. Priests accept the pilgrims' offerings, placing them at the Sivalingam and giving back prasadam.

Inside the holy cave I feel as if we have been transported back in time, such is the grandeur and size of the cave. The very sight of the naturally formed Sivalingam, nearly six feet tall, mesmerizes us all, and my exhaustion disappears. I am feeling absolutely fresh, and my mind is spinning with all the stories and legends I have ever heard about the cave.

By chance, we have entered with a senior paramilitary officer and his family and are able to get quite close to the Lingam, which allows for good photography. I am fortunate enough to be part of the elaborate puja performed for the officer's family. As I stand with folded hands and moist eyes, a wave of serenity and peace engulfs me and I am in a state of meditation for a few minutes, tuned to Lord Siva through the magnificent and all-pervading vibrations of the ice Lingam. Only because of this super power and blessings of Lord

Siva have I, along with thousands of pilgrims, been able to make it to this holy cave at this altitude, a superhuman act that not everyone can perform in his or her lifetime.

At Last, the Sacred Destination Is Reached!



ALL PHOTOS: SUDHARAK OLIVE/DINODIA.COM

(clockwise from above) Pilgrims wait in line on the steps up to Amarnath Cave; the ice Sivalingam, the pilgrims' destination; the high altitude does not hinder these dancing youth; pilgrims approaching the cave (near center, in the cliff) and the tent city below it; the trek crosses snow fields along this river outside Panchtarni





Bliss, and a Dusty Return to Civilization



ALL PHOTOS: SUDHARAK OLIWE/DININDIA.COM



When I open my eyes, I realize I am praying to the ice Sivalingam with hundreds of fellow pilgrims. All faces around me are blissful and calm. The whole cave is charged with serenity and devotion. Some pilgrims are performing puja to Lord Siva and Parvati at a small temple at the left side of the cave, while most worship at the naturally formed ice Sivalingam, which is on the extreme right side of the cave. A fleet of priests assist the pilgrims with their pujas.

Refreshed, rejuvenated and uplifted, I leave the holy cave thanking Lord Siva millions of times for blessing me to be able to have His darshan here at what seems the top of the world.

On the way down I speak to some of the other pilgrims. Yogita Chanderia, a student from Bhopal, tells me, "I am feeling great after the darshan. Certainly the journey was very tough. But what to say? Bhole Baba called and we came."

We spot a bhandara and take some light refreshments. Once again I am moved by the commitment and dedication of the Hindu youth who serve the pilgrims so selflessly. I spoke with manager Pankaj Bhatia, 32, who recalls, "When we came here 14 years back, there were no bhandaras and one had to pay \$0.74 to buy one single chapati. My whole family comes, including my two-month-old son. The time I spend here I consider my real life; the rest is just not important."

The Journey Home

Though we had planned to spend the night at Panchtarni after the darshan, we have no satisfactory arrangements. Our spiritual batteries fully charged, we decide to leave for Baltal straightaway, though it means covering another 14 km by pony. Sudharak is ex-

hausted and I am suffering badly from sunburn, but we manage to endure the six hours of dusty riding. The journey is scenic, but nothing compared to what we have already experienced.

Baltal has huge bhandaras. Most pilgrims go to Amarnath from here rather than from Chandanwari, and more still leave by this route. We stop briefly for food, then find our taxi. We reach Srinagar well past midnight.

We will spend several days here. Our main objective—besides resting—is to interview Chadi Mubarak Mahant Deependra Giri Ji Maharaj [see page 23] as well as Navin Choudhary, CEO of the Shrine Board [see page 25].

I seek medical attention for my sunburn. A specialist tells me the epidermis has completely burnt and a new layer will replace it within a few weeks. In the meantime, I am quite a sight with my skin peeling off everywhere.

On the outskirts of town, we visit the famous Kheer Bhavani Temple of the Kashmir Pandits. We also visit the ashram of the Kashmir Pandit saint Bhagwan Gopinath Maharaj. I meet Anil Raina, a journalist who

has been going to Amarnath since he was ten. He tells me, "For me, if there is a God anywhere, it is in the holy cave of Amarnath. Anyone who has been there will tell you about the strong vibrations you feel. All your fatigue vanishes."

To celebrate the success of our trip, I invite photographer Sudharak to have lunch at prestigious Taj Hotel. The hotel's panoramic view of Srinagar and adjoining areas is breathtaking. In the evening we go boating on the famous Dal Lake.

On the plane back to Delhi I sleep soundly for the first time in days. Lord Siva appears to me in a dream and whispers, "Rajiv, do you realize I have completely changed all the fortune lines of your forehead. I have changed your destiny." Opening my eyes, I touch my forehead and realize the skin peeling off will indeed change the lines of my forehead. It is a common belief in India that one's destiny is marked on one's forehead at birth by a Deity. Suddenly I have a new perspective on the painful and bothersome sunburn. In my heart I once again thank Baba Barfani for His blessings and especially for these revelations on the changes the yatra will bring.



(counterclockwise from above left) Joyous pilgrims from Punjab approaching the cave for worship; the return trip to Baltal is enveloped in dust for kilometers on end; (inset) Hinduism Today's correspondent, Rajiv Malik, is steered by two pony wallahs on a tough stretch; view from the cave into the valley below



AMITAVA SARKAR

The art of angika abhinaya: Hema teaches Aisha Wadhwanie the subtleties of Bharata Natyam's disciplined use of hand and body gestures to express the emotions and meanings of a piece

CULTURE

Passing on Dharma through Sacred Dance

Hema Rajagopalan's lifetime of dance and teaching goes far beyond art—it is the powerful transmission of cultural and spiritual values to the next generation

BY SONIA KUMAR, CHICAGO, USA

BEGAN LEARNING BHARATA NATYAM with Hema Rajagopalan in the Chicago suburbs at age 17, about the age when many of her students would move on to college and Bharata Natyam would be displaced in their lives with different priorities. Now, over twenty years later, I am bringing my daughter to Hema Auntie for classes. As a Punjabi, raised in the tradition of the Sikh gurdwara, and an older beginning student, I have had a unique perch from which to observe the tradition of learning this South Indian classical dance and the benefits it bestows on the student and family. I discovered that learning a classical art is not some outmoded "orthodox" practice—a mindset that is a relic of my Punjabi-Delhi influenced thinking—but rather a dynamic and standard part of life for many Hindus.

"Why Bharata Natyam?" friends would ask. "Why not Kathak? And how do you understand the language?" I like the athleticism of Bharata Natyam, particularly in the style taught by Hema Auntie. Students trained by her are easily identifiable by their strong postures, clean movements and stamina. As

for learning songs in languages wholly unfamiliar to me, it was no different than when I began to learn the piano.

But overall, what drew me to Bharata Natyam for myself and my daughter is the fact that it is a beautiful tool through which



COURTESY SONIA KUMAR

any aspect of Hinduism can be delved into. That same spiritual quest is at the heart of Hema Auntie's pursuit of her art. She has had hundreds of students since beginning her dance school (which now goes by the name Natya Dance Theatre) in the mid-1970s. Her devotion to and success with her art has been well documented. But deserving equal recognition is the spiritual guidance she provides. Over the years she has cultivated and maintained deep relationships with many of her students and their families. I asked her what teaching children has taught her—especially seeing them through their most formative years. What could she share with me to help me with my kids?

"All of my students have been good children," Auntie says. Considering the number of teenagers she has taught, I wondered if this were possible. But if you go through the

Author: Sonia Kumar, 38, is a full-time mother of three who writes in her spare time. Read her blog at cantonment-series.blogspot.com. Her first children's book will be published in early 2013.



Stories told with hands: (above) As a youth, Hema portrays a character looking in a mirror; (below right) vignette of a lady adorning herself with earrings

roster of Hema Auntie's former students and see what they are doing now, having a solid education and a productive and satisfying career seem to be directly connected with graduating from Hema Auntie's dance school. She explained, "It's the power of the art form. The lyrics and the episodic stories teach us." She is positive about this. I remember typical preparation for weekly class with Hema Auntie would include practicing pure dance and also studying and practicing expressional dance at home. This second task required us to first memorize the English

A dedicated life: In 1956, at the age of six, Hema made her first public performance in Chennai, keeping her audience spellbound for three hours. She and her husband came to Chicago in 1974. Concerned by the cultural void she found, she began teaching dance to Indian-American girls in her living room. Three decades later, a grandmother and still strong at 62, her home classroom has become a full-fledged Bharata Natyam school and a dance company internationally renowned for integrity of tradition and choreographic innovation. see: www.natyacom/about/hemas-story

translation of the lyrics of the compositions, understanding and absorbing the meaning of those words. After that, we memorized and mastered the expressional choreography. It is a truly meditative exercise, where the dancer becomes the angry Yashoda, the naughty Krishna, the patient Sabari waiting for Lord Ram, or the lovelorn heroine pining for her divine lover. This highly disciplined practice affirms the concept of Hindu philosophy as a way of life, not as an isolated component of life. Contrast this with attending a weekly Bollywood dance class—certainly less rigorous and occasionally more fun—which leads to a weaker spiritual foundation.

Aside from engaging with a classical art form, I asked Hema about other techniques to make spiritual practice palatable to children. How do we transfer the teachings of those lyrics and episodic stories to our daily lives? "Create and maintain rituals and routines," advises Hema Auntie. "The supposed mundane, everyday tasks are the key to bhakti and cultivating devotion within the heart. Many of our devotional compositions, including those used for Bharata Natyam pieces, are about hoping for and experiencing the Divine as we go about our everyday lives. A child can begin with simple, manageable tasks such as making his bed in the morning, picking up his dishes after eating, and so on. An adult devotee can resolve to keep his house clean. If the bed is not made



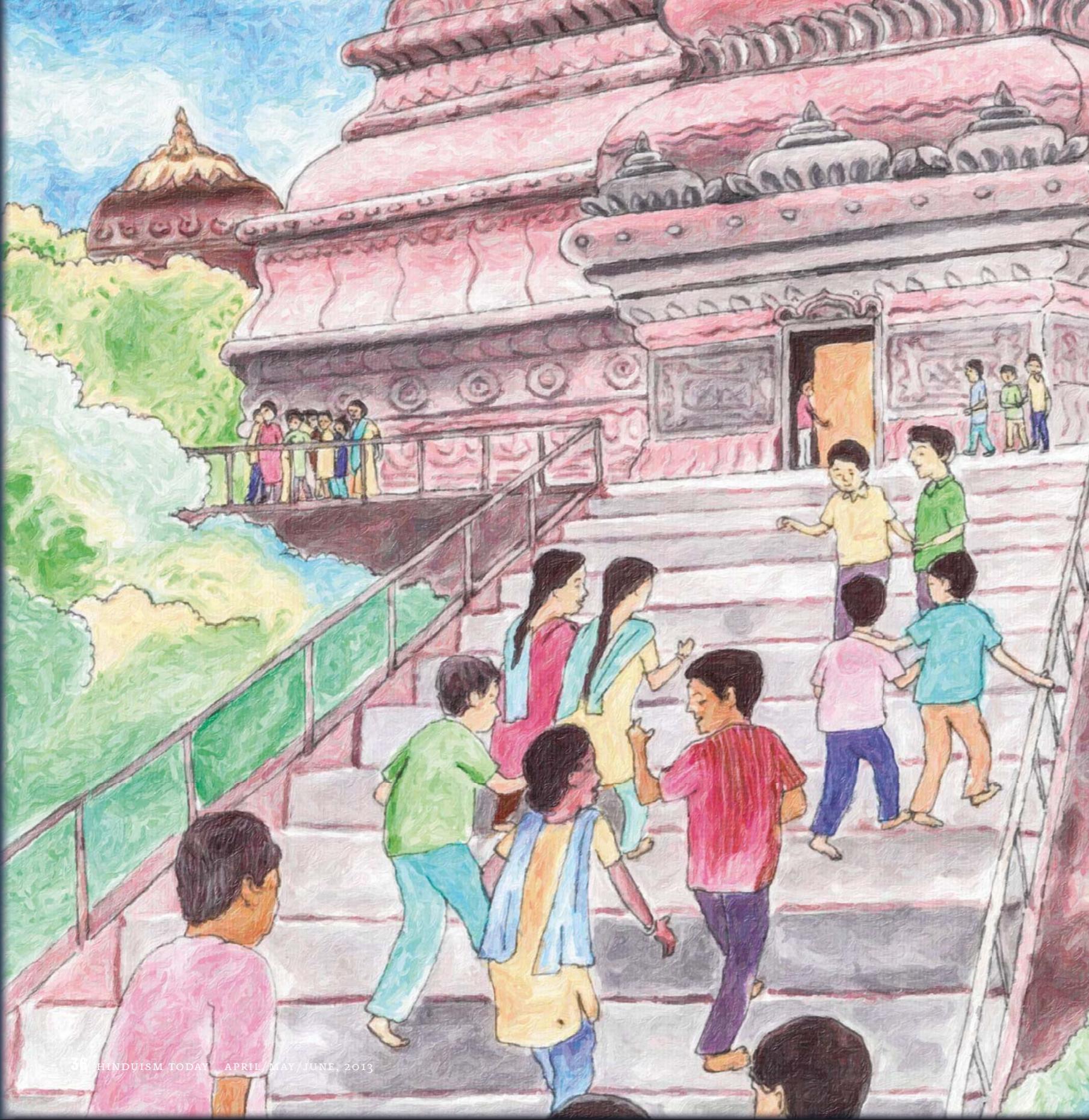
ALL PHOTOS BY AMITAVA SARKAR

or the house is not clean one day, then the habit begins to form and subsequent days begin not to matter. Engaging in ritual exercises will cultivate the bhakti and clear our mind in order to arrive at an understanding of why we make our bed, pick up after ourselves, and keep our home clean."

Modest, tradition-influenced dress is another easily manageable tool for children and parents. "Other communities have outward signs of their membership—Jews, Sikhs—why not Hindus?" Hema Auntie asks. She remembers her daughter's resistance to wearing a bindi every day to school. But as a parent, she continued to wear traditional clothes and set an example for her daughter. She says, "Hindu philosophy is not constrictive. Every household can practice in its own way."

Ultimately, what has helped her students is their education in basic values. For all of us, the goal should be to become well-versed in our values and the history of their establishment. "One should always be on a quest, always persevering. Being fundamentally equipped with knowledge doesn't happen overnight. Children should go out, explore, question," Hema Auntie says. "We should strive to be sensitive to our surroundings and connected and empathetic with others. That is one way in which we shed the ego." But she says children also need explicit delineations of what is wrong and right. "This is where having a strong foundation in our scriptures, our values, is critical. They help the parents to teach and the children to learn. They help us to realize and experience a divine presence. And just as it happens for me, when children are tuned into that presence, answers will fall into place."





Growing Up Hindu

Morality stories for Hindu youth

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

PARENTS ARE ONE'S FIRST guru. They teach by example, explanation, giving advice and direction. Very often parents come to me for advice on the subject of raising their children as good Hindus. In response, I developed a list of ten key character qualities to develop in a child that were published in our Jul/Aug/Sep 2002 issue. These ten qualities—positive self-concept, perceptive self-correction, powerful self-control, etc.—are basic qualities needed by anyone who wants to be happy, religious and successful when they reach adulthood. For this first book of the Hindu Youth Series, I requested our team of editors, writers, artists and reviewers to create a set of ten stories illustrating how these qualities might be learned when growing up. They are set in modern US, India, Malaysia and Canada and intended for youth 14



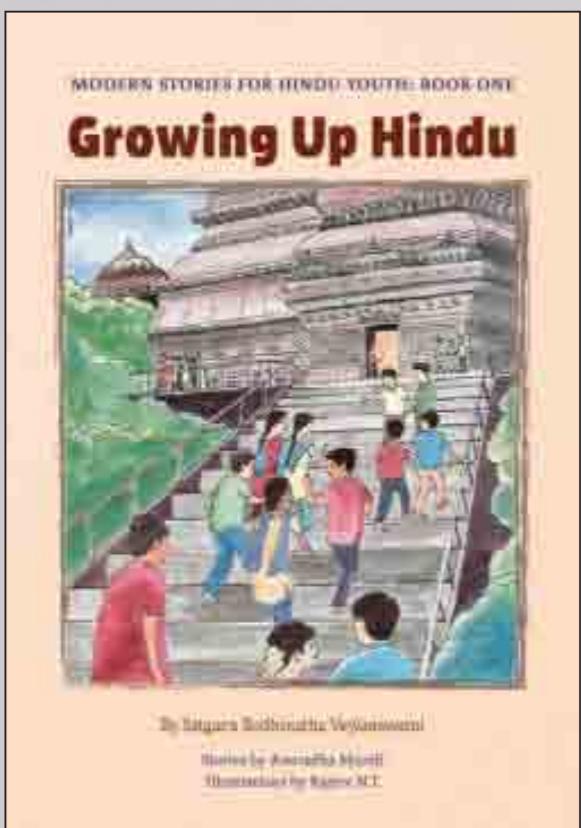
and up—the time when we start to take responsibility for our own actions and when these important qualities should manifest.

EACH STORY ILLUSTRATES one concept, generally as instilled by the parents when their child is young and then as demonstrated in the youth when faced with a challenging situation. For example, the first quality, positive self-concept, is illustrated through the story of a young boy who successfully deals with a bully at school. Another focuses on two sisters who finally learn to get along by putting into practice "perceptive self-correction" as taught to them when they were children. A third, set in Malaysia, discusses the parallel lives of two sets of cousins, one that was taught "playful self-contentment" as children and the other that was driven only to succeed, at the cost of their own happiness later in life.

STORIES BY ANURADHA MURALI ♦ ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAJEEV N.T.

How Lord Ganesha Saved Little Usha

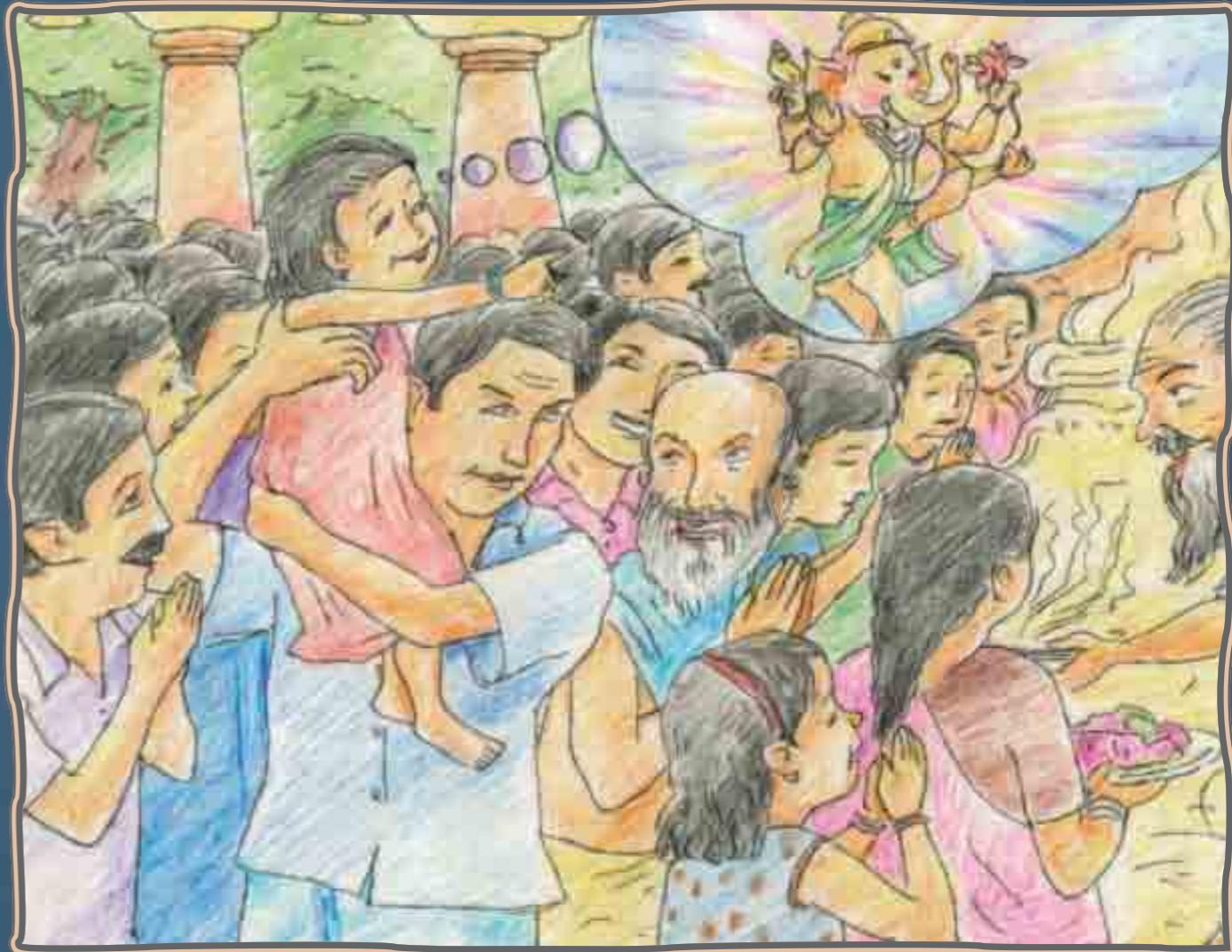
This story, excerpted from *Growing Up Hindu*, illustrates the virtue of pious character, one of ten basic qualities needed by anyone who wants to be happy, religious and successful when they reach adulthood.



Usha and Anjana's parents, Umesh and Swati, loved the Hindu way of life, and they promised one another they would instill that same pious character in their daughters. As soon as each girl was old enough, she was given something to do at the family's daily morning puja, starting with fetching the tray of flowers or filling the water bowl. From an early age the sisters loved the worship, the chanting, singing and incense—not to mention the scrumptious prasadam!

They first went to India when Usha was just six and Anjana was nine. The girls were excited to arrive in Mumbai right on time for the annual Ganesha festival. As the family drove to the ceremonies from the airport, Usha and Anjana lit up at the sight of the huge pandals, temporary temples, set up in the busy streets. Each featured a large and magnificent Ganesha created just for the eleven-day festival.

Even more exciting was their experience at the famous Siddhi Vinayaka temple. When they arrived, it was completely packed with people. After standing in the long line for



over an hour, they moved near the inner sanctum, where they could finally see Ganesha—except Usha, who was too short. "Lift me up, Daddy, lift me up," she pleaded, tugging on his pant leg.

Dad lifted her up high so she could see Ganesha.

Suddenly Usha yelled, "He's dancing!" "Who's dancing?" "He's dancing," Usha replied, pointing at Ganesha.

"What do you mean? That's a stone statue—how can it move?"

"No, He's dancing!" she insisted. "I can see Him moving His arms and trunk and rocking back and forth!"

Usha was nearly shouting in her excitement, and nearby devotees took notice.

An elderly lady next to Dad asked, "What is she saying?" "She's seeing the God dance,"

replied a man to the lady's right.

"Is it so?! Jai Ganapati!"

By now the priest had come over. Offering namaskara to Usha, he announced, "We have all been blessed today by this little girl's vision."

The family was still chattering about it when they arrived at the home of Umesh's parents. After greeting their son and his family with arati at the door, Umesh's parents took the family to the shrine room. At that point the day's second unusual event took place. Usha walked over to

a shelf near the altar and picked up a strand of prayer beads. "These are mine!"

Her dad told her softly, "I don't think so. You have never even been here before. So, how could they be yours?"

"They are mine! I use them every day."

Umesh's mother looked at her husband, "Those beads belonged to my mother, the very person Usha was named after."

"Do you suppose Usha is your mom reborn?"

Suddenly, Usha put the beads back and ran into the next room.



Bewildered, the adults followed her.

"This has been a strange day!" exclaimed Swati.

"Where did the kitchen go?" Usha called out from the end of one hallway.

"Now what?" asked Dad.

Umesh's father offered an explanation. "This was Grandma Usha's home, but it has since been remodeled. Your daughter is standing right where the kitchen used to be! How could she know? Even you didn't know that."

The next day, Dilip came for a visit. He was a close friend of the family and a talented astrologer. They explained Usha's behavior. The following day, he returned. Excitedly, he announced, "I have studied their charts, and I believe they are indeed the same soul. This is wonderful! But I also have to caution you about something."

"What's that?" asked Mom.

"Usha will be naturally religious, but she will become rebellious as a teen. You should watch for that



and be ready to guide her wisely."

After a week in Mumbai, the family headed back to America. Usha's memory of her great-grandmother's house and the prayer beads faded quickly, and she forgot all about it by the time she was eight.

As they grew up, Usha and her sister loved the temple, the festivals, the singing and their twice-weekly bharata natyam classes. They were two of the

best students in their weekly Hinduism class. But, just as the astrologer had predicted, all this changed for Usha when she began high school, the same year Anjana left home for college.

The young Usha was both pretty and talented. She started to spend more time with a new circle of friends, the school's "popular" girls. None of them was particularly religious, and Usha

kept quiet as they entertained each other by mocking the beliefs of Christian students and gossiping about the school's two Muslims.

It was perhaps natural that she began doubting her own beliefs. Around her friends Usha never uttered a word about her faith. She was afraid they might not like her if they knew she was a practicing Hindu. Maybe Hinduism was just another religion that should be left in the past, she pondered, just as her friends frequently said about the other faiths.

Usha walked a fine line to be accepted by this clique of girls. She never mentioned how conservative her parents were; they expected her to not date until she was 21! Usha went to a few parties with her friends, but avoided showing interest in any of the boys.

One spring, Usha and her friends made plans for a three-day holiday weekend at Yosemite Park, one of the most beautiful places in California. Nervously, Usha told Mom and Dad about the trip, asking if she could go. Fortunately for Usha, it was a chaperoned event, with Susan's parents going as well as several other adults. Otherwise, Dad would have had none of it! As it was, he was not objecting, but Mom was visibly uncomfortable about it. She knew the other girls could be sneaky and manage to get into mischief despite the chaperones. "We should ask Lord Ganesha about this."

"How are we going to do

The Value of Pious Character

Pious character is evident when we naturally treat others with kindness, generosity and appreciation. It is fulfilled when we seek the blessings of God, Gods and guru throughout life. How can this be cultivated in children? It is through the parents' demonstrating these qualities themselves: children learn that this behavior is expected of them by observing their parents' actions. It is by referring often to the ten observances (niyamas) of Hinduism's Code of Conduct and pointing out their relevance in daily life, on TV and in movies.

The niyamas are remorse, contentment, giving, faith, worship of the Lord, scriptural listening, cognition, sacred vows, recitation and austerity. Pious character is nurtured by teaching the child to worship and pray in the home shrine or at the temple before important events, such as beginning a new school year or before final examinations. Pious conduct brings into our children's lives the joys of divine blessings. My Gurudeva outlined the ideal: "Hindu children are always treated with great respect and awe, for one does not always know who they are. They may be incarnations of a grandmother, grandfather, aunt or uncle, dearly beloved mother, sister, brother, respected father, a yogi or rishi returned to flesh to help mankind spiritually. We must ask, 'Who are these souls? What is their destiny in this life? How can I help?'"



that?" Usha challenged, worried they would not let her go.

"How can you, of all people, ask that?" said Mom. "It was you who saw Him dancing in the temple!"

"That was a long time ago, Mom, and maybe it didn't really happen."

"Oh, it happened alright," said Mom. "The entire temple practically

came to a stop as a result. I know He will give us a sign. Just you wait."

They sent a written prayer to Ganesha through the temple's sacred fire and agreed to allow Him a week for a response. After all, He might be busy with other concerns.

All that week the girls talked and giggled about the trip. Susan's parents would take their SUV, and Susan, Usha and

Melissa would follow in their sedan.

On Friday morning, Susan caught Usha in the hall before their first class. "Hey, Usha, we decided to leave this evening instead of tomorrow. I hope you are ready."

Usha froze. There had been no sign from Ganesha, so she had not received permission. Still, she reasoned, no sign didn't necessarily mean "no," so Mom will probably agree. "I'm ready," she told Susan.

"By the way, I invited Nicole to join us. She's been wanting to get in with our group, and this is a chance to get to know her."

This was a bombshell for Usha. Nicole had been trying to join with the girls all year, but Usha didn't like her and had managed to keep her out. Back in eighth grade, they had gotten into quite a fight when Nicole started some gossip about her that was completely untrue. Nicole was also a bit of a sneak, and Usha was sure she had cheated on at least one important test this year. As far as Usha knew, Susan didn't like Nicole either, but obviously something had changed.

Usha replied angrily, "But you know how I feel about her! Why did you call her?"

"Look, I didn't really have a choice. She would think I was mean if I left her out once she found out about it. She's definitely coming."

"In that case, count me out." Usha abruptly walked away.

What Is Worship?

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI

Worship could be defined as communication on a very high level: a truly sophisticated form of "channeling," as New-Age people might say; clairvoyant or clairaudient experience, as mystics would describe it; or heart-felt love interchanged between Deity and devotee, as the ordinary person would describe it. Worship for the Hindu is on many levels and of many kinds. In the home, children worship their father and mother as God and Goddess because they love them. The husband worships his wife as a Goddess. The wife worships her husband as a God.

In the shrine room, the entire family together worships images of Gods, Goddesses and saints, beseeching them as their dear friends. The family goes to the temple daily, or at least once a week, attends seasonal festivals and takes a far-off pilgrimage once a year. Worship is the binding force that keeps the Hindu family together. On a deeper level, external worship is internalized, worshiping God within through meditation and contemplation. This form of worship leads into yoga and profound mystical experiences.

All Hindus have guardian devas who live on the astral plane and guide, guard and protect their lives. The great Mahadevas in the temple that the devotees frequent send their deva ambassadors into the homes to live with the devotees. A room is set aside for these permanent unseen guests, a room that the



When Usha walked in the front door of her home, Mom took one look at her face and asked, "Usha, what happened?"

"Susan invited Nicole on the camping trip. Now I'm not going!"

Mom knew how much Usha had wanted to go and how excited she had been. "Maybe this is the sign from Ganesha."

Usha looked at Mom. "What are you talking about? What has Ganesha got to do with this? Susan's just mean." She ran to her room and slammed the door.

At 3:00 in the morning, Usha woke up to the shrill ring of the phone. Rubbing her eyes, she heard Mom answering the call. She felt a chill run down her spine as

her mother asked, "Which hospital?"

She rushed down the stairs, now feeling quite afraid. Mom put down the phone and said, "Usha, Susan's car crashed."

"Oh, no!"

"The girls are safe. They are at a hospital near Yosemite getting treated for minor cuts. Susan's parents are with them, and they're driving back this morning. They're all too shaken up to continue the camping trip."

Dad, Mom and Usha met the group at Susan's house. Mom brought some idlis she had cooked early that morning. The families were good friends, and she knew they would love some home-cooked Indian food after their ordeal.

Still upset, Susan explained what happened. "We were driving slowly because it was already dark, but Nicole kept goading me to drive faster. It was an uphill drive, you know, and when I rounded a curve, I lost control and we went off the shoulder. Fortunately, the car slid into two trees—otherwise we would have gone off a cliff! I'll tell you, there's nothing like the feeling of that seat belt tightening around you when your car is flying off the road, and 'boom,' the airbag blowing up in your face. We are lucky to be alive."

"Wow, that must have been scary!"

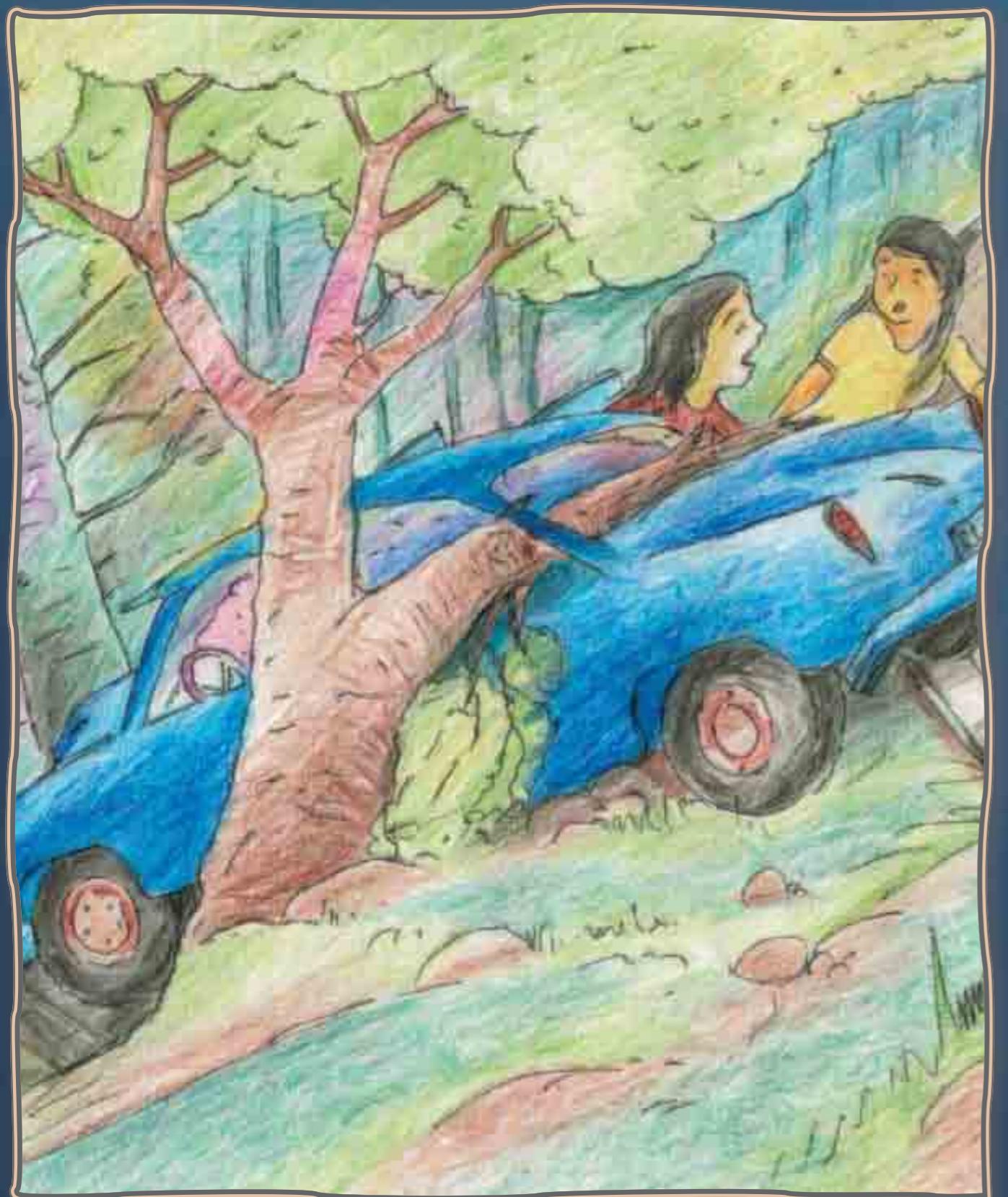
"It was, Usha. But at least no one was seriously hurt. When I

...WHAT IS WORSHIP?

whole family can enter and sit in and commune inwardly with these refined beings who are dedicated to protecting the family generation after generation. Some of them are their own ancestors. All Hindus are taught from childhood that the guest is God, and they treat any guest royally who comes to visit. Hindus also treat God as God and devas as Gods when they come to live permanently in the home.

The ideal of Ishvarapujana, worship, is to always be living with God, living with Siva, in God's house, which is also your house, and regularly going to God's temple. This lays the foundation for finding God within. When we are living in God's house, it is easy to see God as pure energy and life within every living form, the trees, the flowers, the plants, the fire, the Earth, humans, animals and all creatures. When we see this life, which is manifest most in living beings, we are seeing God Siva. Many families are too selfish to set aside a room for God. Though they have their personal libraries, rumpus rooms, two living rooms, multiple bedrooms, their superficial religion borders on a new Indian religion. Their shrine is a closet, or pictures of God and Goddesses on the vanity mirror of their dressing table. The results of such worship are nil, and their life reflects the chaos that we see in the world today.

It is often said that worship is not only a performance at a certain time of day in a certain place, but a state of being in which every act, morning to night, is done in Siva consciousness, in which life becomes an offering to God. Then we can begin to see Siva in everyone we meet. When we try, just try—and we don't have to be successful all the time—to separate the life of the individual from his personality, immediately we are in higher consciousness and can reflect contentment and faith, compassion, steadfastness and all the higher qualities, which is sometimes not possible to do if we are



looked around the car, I saw that a tree branch had come through the rear window and punctured the back seat. If you had come on the trip, too, then two of us would have been in the back instead of all in the front. Someone could have died!"

When Usha reached home, she went to the shrine room and put a flower before Ganesha. "Thank you for getting in the way of my going on that trip. I'm sorry I forgot that you look after me." Suddenly she vividly remembered Ganesha dancing for her years ago. It was as if she was seeing it all for the first time.

Returning to the living room, Usha sat with her parents. "You were right to question this trip. You knew I might follow the lead of the other girls. By leaving the matter up to Ganesha, you helped me reconnect with Him. I also realized that Susan and her friends are not right for me. They invited Nicole, I found out, because she promised to get them wine and beer for the weekend. I need to associate with a group that shares our values."

Three years later Usha left home for university. Arriving at her new dorm, the first thing she did was hang up the big poster of Ganesha from her room at home. She never failed to pray to Him each day. She knew He was watching over her.



...WHAT IS WORSHIP?

only looking at the external person. This practice, of Ishvarapujana sadhana, can be performed all through the day and even in one's dreams at night.

Meditation, too, in the Hindu way is based on worship. It is true that Hindus do teach meditation techniques to those who have Western backgrounds as a mind-manipulative experience. However, a Hindu adept, rishi or jnani, even an experienced elder, knows that meditation is a natural outgrowth of the charya, kriya and yoga paths. It is based on a religious foundation, as trigonometry is based on geometry, algebra and arithmetic. If you are worshiping properly, if you take worship to its pinnacle, you are in perfect meditation.

We have seen many devotees going through the form of worship with no communication with the God they are worshiping or even the stone that the God uses as a temporary body. They don't even have a smile on their face. They are going through the motions because they have been taught that meditation is the ultimate, and worship can be dispensed with after a certain time. Small wonder that when they are in meditation, their minds are confused and subconscious overloads harass them. Breathing is irregular, and if made regular has to be forced. Their materialistic outlook on life—of seeing God everywhere, yet not in those places they rationalize God can never possibly be—contradicts their professed dedication to the Hindu way of life.

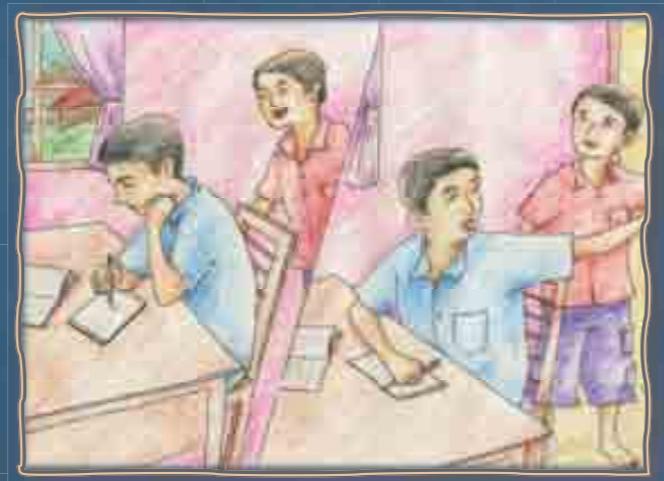
Yes, truly, worship unreservedly. Perfect this. Then, after initiation, internalize that worship through yoga practices given by a satguru. Through that same internal worship, unreservedly, you will eventually attain the highest goal.

Other Fun Stories in the Series

At right are previews of six more of the books' ten stories in which youth are challenged to put into action invaluable skills instilled early in their life—skills such as self-correction, self-confidence, proficiency in conflict resolution—as they face real-life situations such as sibling rivalry, conflict at school, family contention and confronting prejudice.

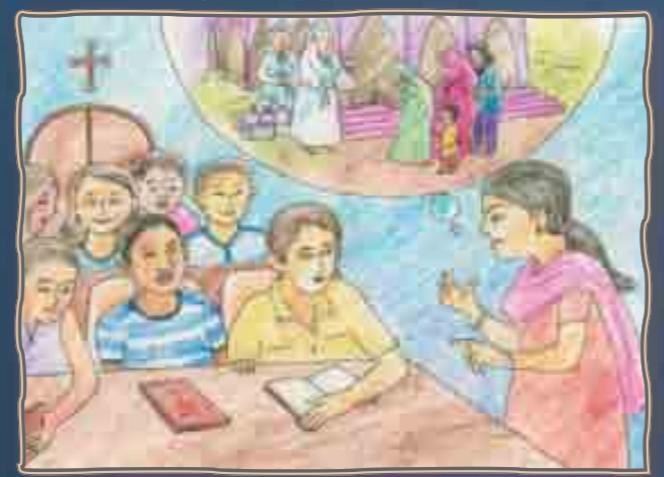
Where to Get the Book

Growing Up Hindu, Book One of Modern Stories for Hindu Youth, is 88 pages long and profusely illustrated with pastel pencil art by Rajeev N.T. of Kerala. It is available for \$20 as hardcover (ISBN: 978-1-934145-43-2) and in popular e-book formats through Amazon.com and Apple's iBookstore. Order at minimela.com or through Amazon.com.



The Jealous Older Brother

Trouble starts between two brothers as the younger one surpasses the older in math skills. In this story, the resulting conflict is worked out over time with parental help which instills a positive self concept in the child, allowing him to acknowledge strengths and weaknesses without falling into jealousy or envy.



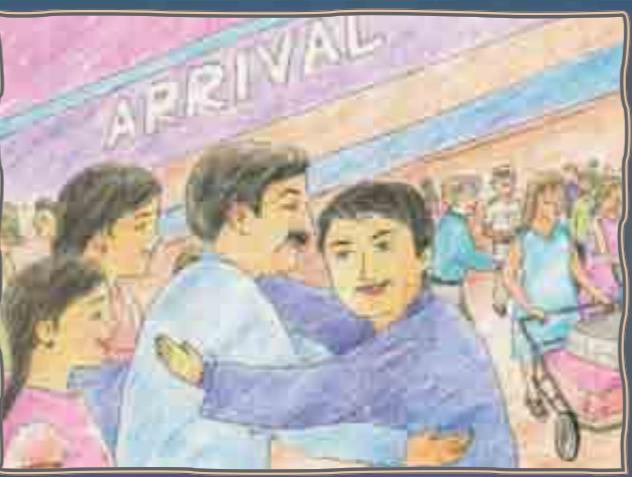
Little Miss Gandhi

Trained as a child to work out disputes with her younger brother fairly and without parental help, Amala takes on and amicably solves a much bigger challenge when an aggressive Christian group at school target a shy new girl with a deceptive strategy known as friendship evangelism.



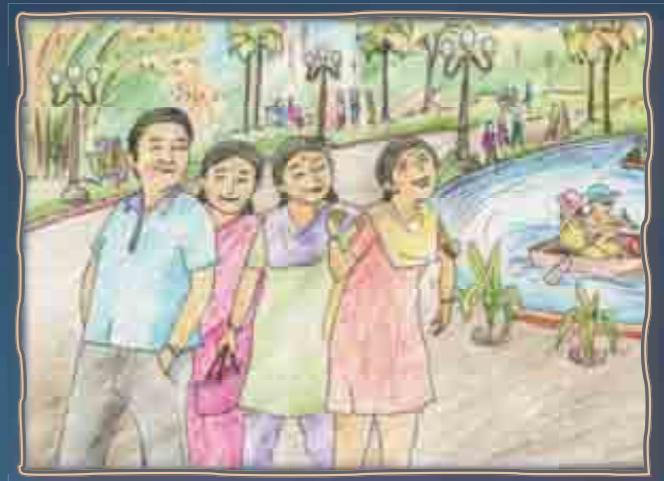
Learning to Get Along

Two sisters make fighting a way of life until they realize one day just how much their spats hurt their mother. They then set out to put into action a skill taught them early in life—perceptive self-correction. They succeed by systematically talking through their differences and arriving at a workable solution for each difficult situation.



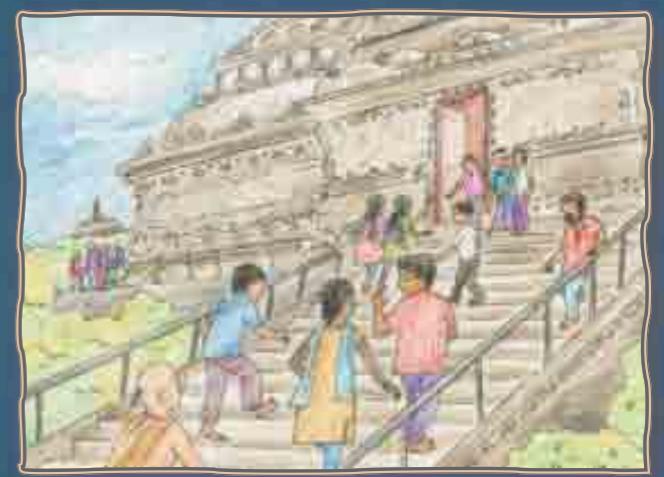
The Value of a Hug

Raj hated getting hugged by his father every day, especially as a taller-than-dad teen. But he gains a new appreciation for his family's closeness during his first semester at college when his roommate bitterly recounts his family's multiple divorces, remarriages and unending conflicts.



Living a Fulfilling Life

A tale of two families: in one the parents push their children to ever higher material goals, in the other mother and father emphasize a wise balance between worldly accomplishment, religious living and enjoying life. In a final deathbed scene, the children of both families come together to share the wisdom of the balanced life.



Ravi Meets Jasmine

Ravi's family take pride in raising their son to have a prejudice-free consciousness, but when he comes home from college with an African American girlfriend who wants to become a Hindu, they struggle with the reaction of their extended family.



T R A D I T I O N

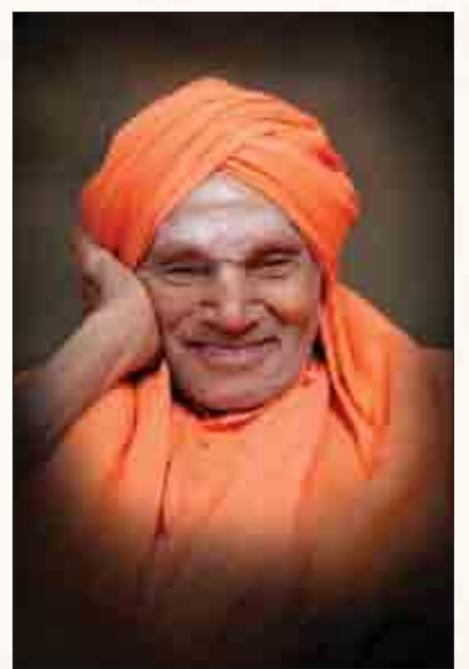
Karnataka's Magnanimous Math

How a 105-year-old swami and his followers are creating a 21st century spiritual and educational legacy that remains faithful to a 700-year-old past

LOCATED NEAR THE TOWN OF TUMKUR, an hour and a half from Bengaluru, Siddaganga Math is among the foremost Lingayat *maths* (home of the guru) in Karnataka. Its revered 105-year-old seer, Sree Sree Dr. Shivakumara Swami, has steered a revolution in affordable education for millions of poor students. Indefatigable to this day, Swamiji follows a grueling schedule of worship, work, teaching and administration, putting in over 20 hours a day seeing to the welfare of the 10500 children housed at his math, serving thousands of devotees and overseeing the math's many educational institutions.

History and lineage

The math's 700-year history begins with the 14th-century sage Prabhu Gosala Siddeshwara Swami. Legend has it that while meditating at a dry, rocky hill which was home to many *siddhas* (mystics), he found a yogi in a cave suffering from thirst and calling out to God for help. Using his yogic power, Swami pressed his knee to the rock and created a spring in the cave, thereby alleviating the yogi's suffering and giving the hill its name, Siddaganga. Swami later founded the math which shares that name.



Siddaganga Math is a Virakta Peetha, where each successor is chosen from the eligible sanyasis rather than from the pontiff's blood relatives. It is dedicated to three forms of *dasoha* (sharing or charity)—anna dasoha

(food), *jnana dasoha* (knowledge) and *vidya dasoha* (education). The *anna dasoha* tradition of feeding the poor was introduced long ago by Adavi Swami; today thousands are fed daily. The *vidya dasoha* culture was introduced when Adavi Swami's successor, Uddhanna Swami, started a Sanskrit gurukula in 1917 so that all children, irrespective of caste or religion, could learn our scriptures; now nearly 7000 students belonging to all castes pursue Sanskrit studies here. Uddhanna Swami's successor, Dr. Shivakumara Swami, the current pontiff, is also deeply committed to providing education for the poor, and he has often walked 15 miles a day in the service of *jnana dasoha*, spreading the message of Veerashaiva dharma and Siddaganga Math to the surrounding villages.

The training of a pontiff

Parameshwarappa is a retired chief engineer

Continued on page 60

Precious pontiff: (clockwise from top) Swami at the twice-daily prayer meeting with students; overseeing the harvest; schoolboys gather cooked rice for a feeding; Swami offers flowers during his daily Siva puja; portrait of a steadfast saint



Where service flows from love of God Siva

DR. SHIVAKUMARA SWAMI IS HAILED AS A WALKING GOD. A practitioner of ashtanga yoga, he is a strict disciplinarian who works tirelessly over 20 hours a day, from 2 am till past 11 pm. Without any assistance, he performs the rigorous three-hour Ishtalinga Puja in the morning, the afternoon puja and the evening puja. "Puja gives strength to life and new chaitanya (higher consciousness)," Swamiji says. "In spite of modernization and new lifestyles, puja is the primary essence of our tradition and culture, our foundation to leading a good, purposeful, spiritual life. We must unfailingly adhere to it."

He lives a frugal lifestyle: no fancy gadgets or cars, no pomp or show. His food habits are meager, and he eats only after worshiping his Siddalinga. If he misses his pujas due to travel, he fasts completely, without even water, even for two full days.

Swamiji makes himself available to each of the thousands of devotees who come to Siddaganga every day from near and far. If not in his chamber, he reclines on a cot in the open verandah outside, where he remains for hours at a stretch until all devotees have had darshan. Devotees throng the math till late at night, even 11 pm, and no one returns home without his blessings. They have faith that their problems will be alleviated with his blessings. "There are innumerable instances when people have had their wishes fulfilled or problems have vanished and health improved," says Renukaradhy, a senior devotee serving the math.

To Swamiji, children are God; he places their well-being and development above all else. Whenever he finds time, he teaches the children Sanskrit and English. His face and eyes light up with joy when he is among them. He gave up drinking milk because it would deprive the children of buttermilk. He practiced walking silently, worried the sound of his wooden sandals would wake the sleeping children. He ensures that the children receive all the warmth and caring of a home and never feel they came from a destitute background. "Even when he is among dignitaries," says Parameshwarappa, "if a child approaches him, he gives all his attention to the child. Recently during a function he was walking to the dais with the President of India. He



called me and instructed me to give some money he had left at his table to a student who would come for it, a young man who had to remit his exam fees."

Swamiji's calendar is astounding. On average he attends 15 padapujas a day (reverential bathing of his feet by devotees), up to 30 during festivals. There is no fixed donation for the seva; he has instructed his staff not to charge a fee for any seva or seek money from devotees. "He accepts even ten rupees," says Shivarudraiah.

Swami travels out of Tumkur and goes for three or four padapujas continuously, not taking even a morsel of food till he returns to the math, no matter what the time. Renukaradhy explains that "the padapuja brings in more devotees to the math, and charity naturally follows, which will help the children. Even a swami has to earn the prasad he consumes, his guru told him. Swamiji believes in earning his food so long as his body is able."

Swamiji is a voracious reader and does not waste a minute. "He reads throughout the journey without break. At times for hours together he doesn't shift his position or take his eyes off what he is reading," says Veerabhadraiah.

I asked Swamiji the secret of his longevity. He gave a mischievous laugh. "If indeed there were a secret, how can one reveal a secret?" His elderly devotees told me his disciplined ways and dedication are the secret of his long life. Dr. Vijayalakshmi attempted to explain: "Our rishi munis lived a very long life, spanning 150, 160 years. Now our lifespan is shorter because of mechanization and modern lifestyle. We are less active, while stress and strain are increased. Swamiji follows the two tenets of Veerashaivism, kayaka and dasoha. He believes in working endlessly and performs service to mankind as seva to God. He has no desire and eats very frugally. He lives for others and has surrendered himself to service. That is the secret of his longevity."

Sree Sree Dr. Sivakumara Swami is the personification of Siddaganga Math. He inspires all who encounter him. Thousands of children growing under his shadow watch him closely and are motivated to serve and live a virtuous life. No wonder he is called Living God.



and close devotee who spends a lot of time with Dr. Shivakumara Swami. "Uddhana Swami was a hard taskmaster," he notes. "Shivakumara Swami had to perform all the chores and tasks at the math, besides attending to his guru and learning. One afternoon, returning from the hill exhausted from collecting firewood in the scorching sun, he retired for a brief nap. On learning the young monk was resting, Uddhana Swami summoned him. 'Did I bring you here and give you sannyas so you could sleep in the afternoon? A sannyasi should not sleep during the day; it is against sannyasa dharma.' Swamiji endured this grueling training unswervingly for 11 years, from 1930 to 1941." To this day, 82 years later, Dr. Shivakumara Swami follows his guru's instructions in toto and has passed on the same values to his successor.

Even in those early days Swamiji was intellectually curious and erudite, holding graduate degrees in Sanskrit, Kannada and English. In 1965 he was given an honorary Doctorate in Literature by the prestigious Karnataka University. He taught mathematics, Sanskrit and English at the Siddaganga institutions for 65 years, until the age of 90.



PHOTOS COURTESY SIDDAGANGA MATH

Holy scribe: Swami takes great care inscribing personal prayers on copper leaves, which devotees cherish

Knowing the value of education, especially in this modern age, he has passionately steered the math to bring education to those who cannot otherwise afford it.

Educating the Underprivileged

Growing from the tiny Sanskrit gurukula founded by Uddhana Swami, today Siddaganga runs 132 institutions, ranging from primary school to engineering colleges. Barring a few, most provide free education;

priority is given to the lowest strata of society. If a student is unable to pay, the donation and even the fees are often waived.

Millions of indigent students have received free shelter and education at Siddaganga institutions. The math runs 29 free hostels and orphanages in Karnataka and three more in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. More than 45,000 students—from kindergarten to post-graduate, professional and pedagogic schools—study in its various branches.

Swamiji is determined that the most eligible of the poor get this opportunity and use it well. At the beginning of each academic year, he screens nearly a thousand applications and personally interviews parents of the selected children. During the year, he makes surprise visits to the hostel to exhort lazing students to study.

Many of the math's protégés have risen to positions of acclaim, both in government and society, and often return to serve the guru. Siddaganga's alumni association presently has 50,000 members.

Retired professor Veerabhadraiah, who taught here for 36 years, is one of those who has returned to serve. "We have seen



Swamiji lift stones and gravel for construction," he recalls. "He has worked so hard to nurture and look after us. He has cooked food for the students and served them personally. There is no work he has not done. He has brought up all of us and the institution by his hard work. We came here with nothing and have reached high positions in life. All the children of Siddaganga employees have received education to the highest level they can reach. Once a person steps into Siddaganga, he's on the road to prosperity, especially in the values he imbibes."

The math's jnana dasoha centers around lectures, discourses by scholars and religious heads, recitations of Vachanas (Veerashaiva sacred writings) and events highlighting our Hindu traditions and Sanatana Dharma. Every day 10,000 students assemble at 6am for puja and prayer. Swamiji unfailingly sits through the half-hour rites and blesses the students. In the evening he again attends the prayer and talks to students about dharma, tradition and culture. The math also promotes spiritually oriented cultural activities; guided by Swamiji, the Siddaganga drama group enthralls people with performances based on the lives and philosophies of the Veerashaiva saints.

Swamiji keeps tabs on every activity, every visitor and all matters related to each and every project. He inspects the kitchen, store



Presumptive successor: Like those before him, Sree Sree Siddalinga Swami has been rigorously tested and trained

visit the math often; as Parameshwarappa explains, it is only natural that they seek their guru's grace and blessings for all their ventures and when they face problems. "But Swamiji does not engage in any political conversation. He would give them general advice on good conduct and good governance."

Successorship

Dr. Shivakumara Swami has trained his presumptive successor, Sree Sree Siddalinga Swami, just as he was trained by Uddhana Swami. And though Swamiji has never left India, he recently sent his successor to Australia and the US, explaining that since he will have to carry on the math's activities in this modern age, he must see the world, broaden his experience and learn.

For Karnataka's less fortunate people, Siddaganga Math is a welcome boon, an oasis of learning amidst illiteracy and poverty. Swamiji speaks sanguinely of the math's future: "It was my guru who inspired me on this path. I am only continuing his work. I have confidence in my successors; they will take this work forward. Our goal is to serve and to uplift the children."

"My encounter with Shivakumara Swami"

BY SKANDA PRASAD, BENGALURU, INDIA

WHEN MY MOTHER MENTIONS SHE IS TRAVELING TO SIDDAGANGA, I eagerly join her so I can meet the 105-year-old pontiff I have known only from television and newspapers.

It is 8am on a cloudy Saturday morning when we drive into the bustling village of Kyatsandra. The steady morning traffic of working people streams past. The narrow lane becomes a pleasant, tree-lined boulevard thronged with groups of schoolchildren and passersby in traditional attire. Soon we sight ahead of us the famed Siddaganga Math, nestled below Siddaganga hill. Painted in large letters on that imposing backdrop are the edicts "Kaayake kailasa," meaning hard work leads to heaven, and "God is one, the faithful call Him by many names."

Entering the *math*, we pass through a sea of excited, smartly dressed young children carrying books and chalk slates. Their holidays are beginning, and they are about to leave for their hometowns. Many parents have already arrived, dressed in traditional North Karnataka garb. A large group of boys listen attentively as their teacher advises them how to live well and utilize their vacations fruitfully.

Shown into Dr. Shivakumara Swami's chambers, where devotees come to seek his blessings, we behold a beautiful marble murti of a meditating Siva. Seated in a large cushioned chair behind an ornate wooden desk, Swamiji's presence fills the room, belying his small frame. Spiritual books line one end of his desk.

Swamiji's sharp eyes regularly dart towards the glass door to ensure that no devotee is kept waiting outside. No one is turned away; no gatekeepers bar access or control the devotees. Math administrators



Authors: Choodie Shivaram and son Skanda Prasad with HINDUISM TODAY editor in Bengaluru

mill about, discussing official matters with the pontiff, but Swamiji's first thought is always for his devotees: if a devotee seeks his blessings, everything else is put aside.

This year the monsoon rains have been inadequate, causing severe drought; local farmers' crops are failing. A television crew is seeking a message from Swamiji to provide strength and solace to the farmers. Someone hands Swamiji a small cue card. He glances at it but speaks unscripted, exhorting the suffering farmers not to despair, but to face

with courage an unavoidable natural calamity that, he assures them, will pass. He reminds them of their duty to their families and asks them not to take any extreme steps (perhaps a reference to the high suicide rate among this group).

Swamiji seems almost unaffected by age. His back is bent, but his strength and alertness are undiminished. I find his gaze piercing and alert, and note he reads the newspaper without glasses. His answers to our many questions are straight and lucid.

Noticing another clan of devotees gathered at the door, he shortens his responses and using his body language indicates we should conclude. We cut short the interview and seek his blessings. Leaving the room, I glance back. Swamiji is already speaking to a devotee. The room around him bustles with activity, but he sits motionless and peaceful in his large chair, unaffected by the commotion around him, his face displaying overwhelming compassion and love.

I have heard of Swamiji's love for children. As we leave the math, we see a crowd of devotees receiving darshan from Swamiji, who is reclining on a wooden platform. As we watch, he speaks to each and every devotee. His eyes are closed for the most part, but when a mother brings her two sons before him, his eyes open and brighten. He draws them closer, eyes brimming with mirth and happiness. With childlike enthusiasm and a grandfather's tenderness, he asks about their studies and life, advising the elder one to study well. As they move on and the next devotee approaches, Swamiji returns to his normal meditative pose.

Even while tending to the hundreds of devotees, Swamiji has not forgotten us; the administrators have been instructed to take us for



Honored sage: Shishyas from Siddaganga and other maths perform padapuja on Swamiji's 105th birthday

lunch and show us around.

I have never experienced the love and kindness Swamiji showers equally on everyone nor the calm peace he radiates while attending to every detail in his impossibly busy schedule. I feel blessed.

SKANDA PRASAD is an electronics engineer working for a multinational semiconductor company in Bengaluru



GOVERNMENT

Pluralism Reaches a Milestone in America

Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii becomes the first Hindu to be sworn in to the United States House of Representatives

BY DR. M I H I R M E G H A N I

AMERICA IS BECOMING MORE HINDU, THERE IS NO DOUBT about it. Phil Goldberg's book, *American Veda*, traces the history of the influence of Hinduism on American life over the past two and a half centuries. Similarly, Lisa Miller, in her *Newsweek* article "We Are All Hindus Now," shows how American thought and practice is moving in a direction that can best be described as Hindu. For the most part, however, this influence has occurred without an outright acknowledgement of or public association with anything identified as Hinduism.

Last November, Tulsi Gabbard became the first Hindu elected to the United States Congress when she handily won her first election to a federal office. The election in Hawaii not only reflects the character and charisma of Tulsi, but also an acceptance, at least in her Congressional district, of Hinduism.

As Americans without familial connections to India have adopted Hindu beliefs and practices, so too have Hindus in America embraced American life and simultaneously adapted Hinduism, with its ancient mooring in India, to the American landscape. Tulsi was born to a Hindu mother of American Samoan ancestry and a non-Indian, Christian father who had adopted some Hindu practices. Raised a Hindu, she, like most Hindu, Jain and Sikh Indian Americans, questioned her beliefs, studied them, read scripture and made a conscious decision to maintain her religion and practices. She explained, "*Hari nama*, the holy names of God, and the transcendental wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita* have always provided me with wisdom, spiritual strength, direction and purpose in life, as well as solace and comfort when faced with the possibility of death at any moment."

Hinduism, or Sanatana Dharma—an ancient, living, vibrant system of religions, traditions, beliefs and practices, encompassing not only India but every country in the world and with over one billion adherents—could only survive in such numbers for so long with an inner strength that rests on universal truths adaptable to a wide range of people and the ability to inspire people to greater acts.

Recall that Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by this same tradition to take ancient Hindu and Jain principles of ahimsa to a political level. Tulsi takes inspiration from that same tradition when she acknowledges, "I learned early on that I was happiest when I was using my life in the service of others.... The spirit of karma yoga has been the motivating factor for everything I do in my life. The more I engaged in activities that weren't just for myself, the happier I became, and the more I wanted to do." That inspiration led her to found the Healthy Hawaii Coalition, teaching schoolchildren about caring for the environment and maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle. That inspired her to run successfully for the Hawaii State Legislature, give up her "safe seat" to join her Army National Guard team for a year-long deployment in Iraq, run successfully for the Honolulu City Council and win a challenging Congressional election.

When Tulsi took the oath of office, she did so on a *Bhagavad Gita*, cementing this ancient guide to action in American and Hindu history. Her oath has added meaning because the *Bhagavad Gita* has



BOMBAY PHOTOGRAPHY

American Hindu: Tulsi Gabbard speaks to attendees of the land blessing ceremony for the Hindu Temple of Greater Fort Worth, Texas, October 27, 2012, a week and a half before Election Day

deep meaning for Tulsi [see sidebar], guiding her and continuously inspiring her to do seva, or selfless service.

This is another defining moment for modern Hinduism, because it should serve to remove any doubts about the ability of a proud, public, practicing Hindu to reach a prominent post or position in this country. Unfortunately, despite inheriting such a rich heritage, many

Indian Americans have shamefully tried to minimize their tradition and hide their Hindu identity from anyone who could potentially think ill of them or misunderstand their beliefs, while others have maintained everything Hindu but decided to call it something else. And worse yet, some have chosen to abandon their heritage altogether.

Governors Bobby Jindal and Nikki Haley are prominent examples of the latter. Instead of seeking inspiration from their Hindu and Sikh backgrounds, respectively, they sought shelter and support in the faith of the majority of their neighbors. They, in some sense, are the opposite of what America is—their contribution to America's melting pot or salad bowl was thereby negated for the most part. Their decision was in fact bad for America, as America is, at its core, becoming more and more pluralistic. Lisa Miller wrote that Americans are more accepting of multiple paths to God and the belief that "many religions can lead to eternal life."

Pluralism is acknowledging and celebrating the diversity around us, and thriving more because of it. It is the legacy of ancient and modern India. It is the essence of Hinduism, and, in the broadest

Tulsi Talks About Taking the Oath on The Bhagavad Gita

I WAS RAISED IN A MULTI-RACIAL, MULTI-CULTURAL, MULTI-faith family. My mother is Hindu; my father is a Catholic lector in his church who also practices mantra meditation. I began to grapple with questions of spirituality as a teenager. Over time, I came to believe that, at its essence, religion gives us a deeper purpose in life than just living for ourselves. Since I was a teenager, I have embraced this spiritual journey through the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

I chose to take the oath of office with my personal copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* because its teachings have inspired me to strive to be a servant-leader, dedicating my time and energy on a daily basis in the service to others, karma yoga. My *Gita* has been a tremendous source of inner peace and strength through many tough challenges in life, including being in the midst of death and turmoil while serving our country in the Middle East. When I was deployed to Iraq, the only real shelter for me was my bhakti yoga practice and the *Bhagavad Gita*'s message of the eternity of the soul and God's unconditional love.

Like Mahatma Gandhi, I believe that we cannot overcome the divisive challenges facing our communities, countries and world if we do not recognize and respect all others as children of God, despite our differences of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion and so forth. These principles of karma yoga and bhakti yoga, therefore, can be a uniting principle for all people, regardless of their religion.

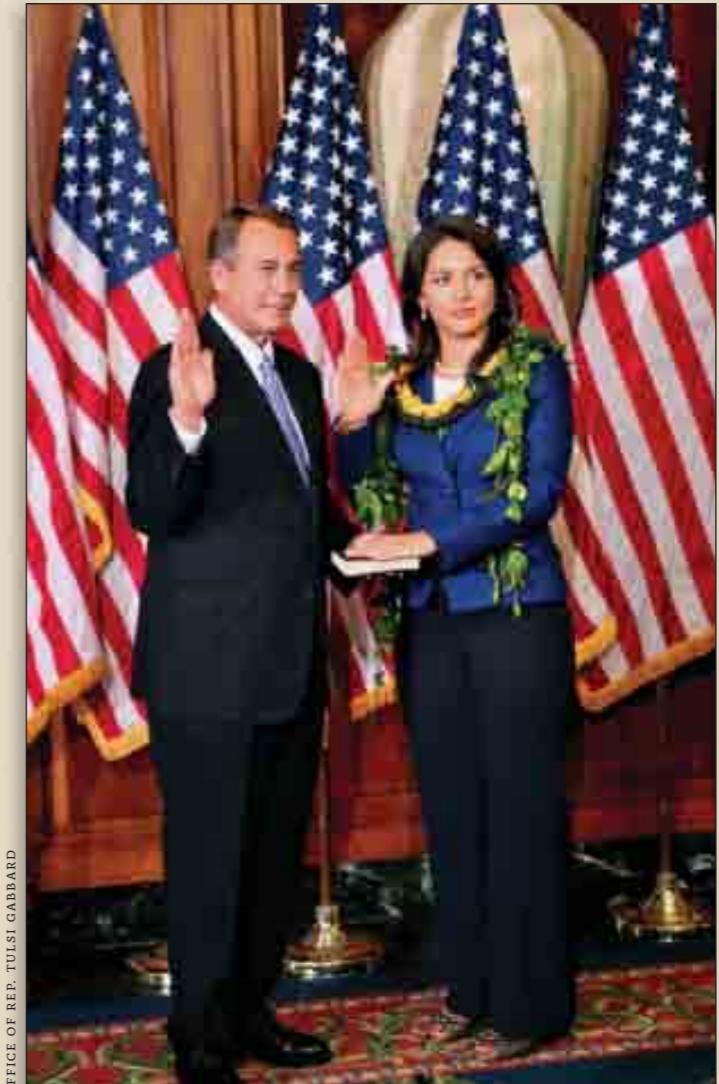
I look forward to working with my fellow Congressmen and women to improve the economy, stop wasting our limited resources, protect the environment and ensure that our children will have a bright future. Of course, since I'm a practicing Hindu, the unique concerns of Hindu and Indian Americans are very near and dear to my heart. My door will always be open to them.

sense, its branches—Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism. It is the thread that ties together India's various cultures, religions, beliefs, practices and races.

Kudos to Tulsi for being public, open and proud of her Hinduism and for sharing with the rest of the world the core message of Hinduism that inspired her. Tulsi's victory is a proud moment for Hindus, because it reminds us that we can reach similar levels of society with a public Hindu identity. Tulsi's oath should be emboldened as individuals to examine our beliefs, seek inspiration from our heritage and look for the practical application of our spiritual tradition, just as Tulsi found motivation for her karma yoga (pursuing God or Truth through good work) in Hinduism.

Her oath-taking should be an even prouder moment for all Americans because it will reflect the best that America can offer the world—pluralism.

MIHIR MEGHANI, M.D., an emergency physician living in Fremont, California, is a co-founder of the Hindu American Foundation. His article originally appeared in India-West, December 14, 2012.



OFFICE OF REP. TULSI GABBARD

Congresswoman: Ms. Gabbard and Speaker John Boehner hold the *Bhagavad Gita* at her oath-taking ceremony, January 4, 2013

CULTURE

Diwali Deep in the Heart of Texas

Each year at the University of Texas at Austin, the Hindu Students Association puts on a grand celebration of light that is a perfect fit for the Lone Star State

BY SIVAGAMI NATESAN, AUSTIN

THE TOWER GLOWS ORANGE LIKE THE flame of a lamp illuminating the Austin skyline. On the campus of the University of Texas, one of America's finer public institutions, the iconic UT Tower serves as a temple of higher learning. Today the tower has literally been converted into a temple—a Hindu temple—the three arches at the base serving as shrines for Ganesha, Lakshmi and Saraswati. The steps are decorated with little lamps forming the shapes of an Aum and a swastika. It is a cloudless, moonless, starlit night. The flame of the tower glows orange today in honor of the festival. The stage is set for Diwali, Texas-style, hosted by the Hindu Students Association. This is one of the largest campuses in the United States, and approximately 3,000 of its 51,000 students are of Indian origin.

Celebration of faith is central to all cultures in all times. Adapting these celebrations to suit a different place and time is central to the sustaining of a culture. Here at UT, a dynamic group of students make this possible each year with their celebrations of Diwali, Holi and Navaratri. "It helps us tie back to our roots and express Hinduism in our own

student way," says Eesha Gulati, a fourth-year undergraduate in communications and South Asian studies. Kokila Priya Muthuraman, a graduate who served on the executive committee of the Hindu Students Association during her four years here, explains, "The intent of this celebration is to share our culture with people who are not familiar with it. We want to share a part of who we are and increase awareness of Hinduism on campus."

The steady stream of guests entering the mall are greeted by students wishing them "Happy Diwali" and putting tilak on their foreheads. Each person is given a small plate decorated with Indian motifs, holding a bag of akshata (unbroken, turmeric-stained rice) and a bookmark with the dearly familiar Ravi Varma rendition of Lakshmi standing on a lotus. On the bookmark is a verse from the *Devi Bhagavatam*: "We meditate upon that principle of sentience reflected in all living beings that is the cause of the universe. May that Goddess, in the form of consciousness, inspire our thoughts."

The guests remove their shoes at the lower level of the south mall and walk up steps decorated with painted pots upturned to serve as bases for a line of diyas (lamps). The

floor of the upper level has been lined with tarpaulin and white sheets designating the seating area. In front of the temporary temple, facing the havan kund (ceremonial fire pit), sits Brahmachari Girish Chaitanya, the acharya of Chinmaya Mission Austin. Four students are seated around the havan with him: Naveen Pattisapu, Tara Sharma, Atul Gupta and Jennifer Chou. Arjun Adapalli and Vishal Sapuram lead bhajans, Arjun strumming his guitar, as people flow in to join the event.

As on any campus, the rainbow of students from many backgrounds is well represented. Some are perfectly dressed in impeccable, traditional Indian clothes; others come straight from their lab or study group wearing shorts and t-shirts. Troy Johnson, a construction planner with the university and part-time student, is attending for his second year. "It gives me the opportunity to experience a different culture without going to India," he says.

A few families bring their young children. Neha Patel is attending with her brother Paras and his wife, their two children and a cousin. "We are not very active in the community, and we have moved to Austin, away

Oh, Texas: (clockwise from left) The iconic clocktower beset with fireworks; Tara Sharma and Naveen Pattisapu greet guests with tilak; the crowd attending the havan and festivities; a boy explores the diyas decorating the steps of the mall

from our home in Houston, so this event gives us an opportunity to participate." Sreenivaas, a graduate student in electrical and computer engineering, bows intently at the shrine. He is away from his home in Chennai for the first time. "I have been so connected to my roots in India for 23 years. I do my daily puja. It is special to have a havan for Diwali."

While India remains the spiritual substratum for us all, the homes of the Indian diaspora are all over the world. That each of us has managed to make and sustain our homes retaining the Indian ethos is a testament to the strength of this culture that pervades our being socially, religiously and culturally. This was brought home by young Puja Patel, a first-year student working in the rangoli booth that the students have set up. "Each year my family meets for Diwali, and we do a big puja. I treasure the job of decorating the front of our home with rangoli. This year, for the first time, I am away from home. Working in the rangoli booth at this event is my way of connecting what I did at home with where I am on campus."

In the storytelling booth, Parth Bhatt, a junior in economics and mathematics, enacts the story of Bali and Sugreeva, inviting fellow students to join in. In another booth the students craft thorans (hanging decorations) for the thresholds of their dorm rooms. At the bazaar booth, the students purchase small trinkets with tokens earned from participating in the other booths. This is a labor-intensive event, with over 60 volunteers carefully programmed into half-hour slots.

Dr. Soncia Reagins-Lilly, Senior Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and the Dean of Students at UT, explains that student events on this campus are entirely student-driven: "If the students are willing to advocate for what they want, the university is willing to support it." The students must work with various university offices and private sponsors to come up with funding for the event. They are also responsible for all logistics—audio-visual, furniture, tents for the booths and activities, etc.—and for obtaining the required permits from the university, fire marshal and police department.

In 2002, when Varun Mehta came to UT, Navaratri was the more public event on the campus. On the weekend closest to Diwali, some 150 students would gather in a covered area on campus and sing bhajans. "I come from a tradition where Diwali is huge," says



PHOTOS: SUSHMA KHADEPAUW-PARMAR



Varun, a co-founder of the Hindu Students Association. "It was important to me that Diwali be celebrated on the actual date rather than on a convenient weekend. Here we were, students on a campus with nowhere to celebrate on Diwali day. On the weekend most students went home anyway."

For Varun and his fellow students this festival meant a puja, fireworks and new clothes. Today the students hand out custom-printed T-shirts for publicity prior to the event. They arrange for a professional fireworks display that is shot from the school's famed clocktower, lighting up the night sky and the faces of the delighted crowd—celebrating the victory of light over darkness, of knowledge over ignorance. The university only permits fireworks to be shot from the tower on one other occasion, and that is graduation night in May.

Amulya Aradhya is a third-year student who bicycled to the event in her traditional *ghagra* outfit. She deeply appreciates the unifying nature of the event. Harold Wardlaw, a physics student, recounts, "I was first

exposed to India only after coming to this campus. Now I cannot get enough of it. After coming here, I have worked in Delhi and am currently looking at internships in Pune. I cannot wait to go back!" Tara Boggaram, a student of anthropology and German, grew up in a small town in Texas. "I was not plugged into things Indian," she shares. "A celebration like this brings young Indian students and their friends together to celebrate on campus."

Accessibility is the key to sustaining Indian culture and sharing it confidently and proudly with the general public. While most families attend local temples for their Diwali celebrations, Vijay and Pratima Kumar choose to bring their two daughters to this celebration each year. "We delight in our children knowing that their celebrations are so accepted on an American university campus," they explain. They have been sponsoring the cost of the havan at this event for the last few years. The Gujarati Samaj of Austin and the Dodia family, whose son attends the university, sponsored the bookmarks given



PHOTOS: SUSHMA KHADEPAUN-PARMAR



Celebration: (clockwise from upper-left) Students offer arati; Brahmachari Girish Chaitanya and the four yajamans officiate the havan; Dhivya Manogaran dances on the diya-lined steps of the mall; attendees hold offerings of rice for Lakshmi; another submits his offering into the fire

out to the guests.

Brahmachari Girishji welcomes the gathering and thanks the Hindu Students Association for inviting him to preside over the havan. He explains the perspective of Indian students growing up in America, providing a brief explanation of Diwali: on this, the darkest night of the year, we seek to make sense of the world around us with the light of understanding. "Today in your classroom it is possible that the lecture went over your head." A few knowing giggles ripple through the crowd. "After class you turned to your friend and asked, 'Can you please shed some light on what happened in class?' It is this light in the form of knowledge that we seek to dispel our ignorance."

Vice President Joe Biden spoke beautifully of that light in his address this year at the White House celebration of India's Festival of Lights: "Folks, one thing that Diwali reminds us of is that there is a light within all of us, a light of knowledge and compassion, a light that empowers us to do good—to, as Abraham Lincoln said, respond to our better angels.... Every year, Diwali reminds us of the fundamental human bonds that unite us, which are much more powerful than those things that divide us. Right now people of four major faiths are celebrating Diwali. Millions of Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists in India and here in America are lighting lamps in their homes, reflecting on a year gone by and praying, as we all are here, for a good year to come."

Beginning the rites, Brahmachari Girishji methodically explains the procedure and philosophy of each step of the havan to the audience. Any auspicious beginning starts with Ganesha, the elephant-headed Remover of Obstacles. We cannot proceed with any activity and expect success without removing the obstacles in our own mind. Next we pay respect to our lineage of teachers. He asks the audience to seek the blessings of each one's lineage of teachers, a step whose importance is underlined on a university campus. He pays respect to his guru, Swami Chinmayananda, by quoting him: "Religion without philosophy is superstition. And philosophy without religion is sheer madness."

He explains why Lakshmi havan is performed for Diwali: "Some people may look at Mother Lakshmi as just the green stuff in our pockets. She is much more than that. Lakshmi must be seen as the true prosperity

of human life, the prosperity of wisdom."

Each part of this universe is invoked in this havan. The planets are represented in betel nuts placed next to the kund. The embodied soul is represented by the kalasha (copper pot) filled with water; the human body is made up of the five elements, predominantly water. The thread tied around the kalasha represents the connection between the gross and the subtle bodies; it has at least 72 lines appearing with a prescribed number of intersections, representing the 72,000 subtle nerves in a human body—the channels through which the pranas, or vital forces, flow. It is into this kalasha of our own being that we welcome Lakshmi as the true prosperity of the human body and mind.

After describing and then chanting the ceremonial sankalpa (expression of intent), Brahmachari Girishji explains, "Together we



PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIPPE BOURGEOIS, PHILIPS COMMONS, GC.CUNY.EDU

University town: the UT Tower beams, its three arches facing the mall at the center of the Austin campus

resolve to bring prosperity to the professors, students and staff of the university, represented by these four yajamans (officiants) seated here on either side of the havan kund." He instructs, "When I say 'swaha,' you guys take a piece of dry coconut and place it in the fire. For those of you participating in the crowd, you guys take a few grains of akshata and place it on your Lakshmi bookmark." His casual lingo reveals his own background of having grown up in the United States. Through his personal experience, he understands the mindset of a Hindu student on an American campus.

The fire grows steadily as he chants and explains the *Purusha Suktam*, an ancient

hymn from the *Rig Veda*. He describes how the universe came out of fire and that the flames are responsible for conveying the prayers and offerings of the havan from this manifest world to the unmanifest world. As the fire peaks during the *purnahuti* (final offering), he directs the crowd to come forward, offer small pieces of dried coconut and accept prasad from the yajamans. The arati song, signaling the end of the rites, is played over the public address system while people young and old take turns offering arati at the three shrines at the base of the tower.

The crowd moves down one level to the lower part of the mall, clearing a stage for the cultural program. Pooja Raman, a second-year student in the Business Honors program, performs a traditional Ganesha Vandana, saying later that she couldn't believe she was dancing under the university tower, looking directly across at the State Capitol dome. Dhivya Manogaran dances the glory of Shri Rama, befitting the event of Diwali. Vishaal Sapuram, a young classical singer and chitra vina player who graduated in December, performs a beautiful song.

Then it is time for the much-anticipated fireworks. "We completed our puja at home and then came here for the fireworks," says an Indian graduate student who brought his American wife and two young children, dressed perfectly in dhoti and ghagra. Their eyes reflect the scintillating fireworks.

The crowd mills around the tent where dinner is being served. There is a nominal charge, since the students were unable to get the food sponsored. The menu is representative of the celebration, Indian in essence but with a twist of imagination: paneer tikka burritos, jeera rice, naan, raita and chilled Mexican-style cucumber drinks made by a team of students. On a college campus, many people show up primarily for the cheap food!

There are so many ways to celebrate Diwali, even right here in middle America. Inspired students like those at the University of Texas have brought the celebrations right into the campus mall, the center of their university community. Brahmachari Girishji puts the event in perspective for the guests: "This is the land of the free and the home of the brave. What is true freedom? Knowledge is the greatest freedom we have." His words echo the line etched in stone above him on the base of the tower in giant, bold letters: "Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free."

Events like this Diwali celebration are held on campuses big and small all over the world where the Indian diaspora has extended. More and more, Americans and those of other cultures are coming to realize that their own deepest convictions have been expressed in Hindu thought since time immemorial. The world is truly one.

TRADITION

Mealtimes Blessings

Thanks: Buddhist monks in Vietnam bless their meal; an American family "says grace"

No matter what's on the plate, giving thanks is universal

The chanting of mantras to invoke and give thanks to God before partaking of a meal is an ancient Hindu tradition, one that has been unfortunately forgotten by many Hindus who have left the traditional village for the cosmopolitan city. Here are excerpts from a charming article in the San Francisco Chronicle reaffirming the value of "saying grace," the wonderful, universal tradition of mealtime blessing that takes place wherever people of any background eat, together or alone.

BY OLIVIA WU, SAN FRANCISCO

WIGGLING AND whispering builds as the three children and eight adults assemble around the dinner table. In the final flurry of spoons, asparagus and water, the father asks for silence. Then Chris Colson, 10, eyes bright, sings in a clear boy-soprano, "For all things good, for friends and food, we give Thee thanks, O Lord." His two foster sisters, 6 and 4, chirp in. In the controlled chaos of Sunday night dinner at the Colson home in San Francisco, the melody etches a searing stillness. A focus snaps into place, and the crazy crush of this three-generation, blended family becomes

"This ritual is One. The food is One. We who offer the food are One. The fire of hunger is also One. All action is One. We who understand this are One."

—Ancient Hindu blessing

the blessing.

In the East Bay, a robed monk lifts seven grains of rice above his head, re-enacting a centuries-old daily ritual before a handful of lay members of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery. They chant a prayer and segue into the weekly Saturday community vegetarian meal, eating in focused silence.

Lynnie, a single, 33-year-old San Francis-

whole.

Every day, all over the San Francisco Bay Area, saying grace—whether to honor a God, celebrate the food or bring a family together—lifts the curtain on mealtime. Despite fast food, the fast lane and the rapid erosion of the traditions of dinner time, millions of Americans cleave to this ritual.

In the gym of the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco's Western Addition, the thumping of basketballs ceases and 40 African American children straggle toward folding tables to hold hands. A moment of stillness, and then, from the lips of a 17-year-old,

co woman who is a member of Overeaters Anonymous, sits before her plate and bows her head. She says thanks for the food, and thanks that "this plateful be enough."

The act of slowing down begins with the blessing of a meal. In a 1998 Gallup poll, 64 percent of Americans said they express gratitude by saying grace at meals; in 63 percent of families with children under 18, someone says it aloud. "Mealtime prayer is a pretty enduring feature in many people's lives," says Gustav Niebuhr, a fellow at the Center for the Study of Religion in Princeton, N.J. The numbers, which have stayed constant since the 1960s, suggest that families lean on the pillars of tradition, but individuals are also joining the ranks in creative, ecumenical ways.

"It's not just that the food is blessed but that the process of eating is itself a renewal," says Mark Jurgensmeyer, professor of sociology and religious studies and director of Global and International Studies at UC Santa Barbara. "The idea of ingestion is almost universal within religious traditions as a sacramental act."

Even for individuals who are not traditionally religious, "There is this little pause at the beginning of a meal," Jurgensmeyer says. "You don't eat before everybody is served,



and often there is a toast, a salute. And that will be a kind of grace—a moment of reflection and appreciation. And that's all grace is."

Graces: Prayers for Everyday Meals and Special Occasions, by June Cotner, (Harper-SanFrancisco, 1994), a collection from many faiths, is in its 31st printing and has sold more than 200,000 copies. Cotner believes her book's popularity shows a hunger for spirituality. A reverent pause before eating in an edgy world affirms family and teaches reverence, Cotner says. She estimates that only 60 percent of those who buy her book are churchgoers. The rest turn the food blessings into opportunities for polyglot fusions, and inspirational, in-the-moment expressions of thanks.

Immigrant families often rely on mealtime rituals to stay connected to their roots and to recall what's important. Luis Trucios of Redwood City, originally from Peru, is raising two children, ages 3 and 5. Prayer was core in his childhood, and prayer is how he keeps tradition, especially at dinner, "because that's when we're together. It leads to meaningful conversation," he says. The message of thanks for the source of food breeds connections beyond the table. Trucios and his wife complete the connections by shopping and cooking with their kids. "They understand the whole circle of food," he says.

For British-born John Farrington of South San Francisco, a single father, a simple "little moment of stillness" in the blessing with his 7-year-old son, Gabriel, "brings history into my son's life. It is a conduit to talk about my history in England." Sensitive to hunger issues, Gabriel recently surprised his father by setting aside half of the waffle he ordered at a restaurant to give to the homeless. "Through giving and prayers, he's not thinking of food for himself," says Farrington. He knows we live in a world (of hunger), not just in America."

Giulio Sorro, 27, of San Francisco is Italian-Filipino, from a lapsed Catholic family. Living as a Bridges Fellowship volunteer among the Luya tribe in Kenya transformed his relation to food. He saw hunger, the always imminent threat of drought, and heard his hosts' heartfelt prayers, which fused Christianity and native religion. "They thanked God and the Earth for the food. They thanked the food," says Sorro.

Says Rev. Heng Sure, director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, "We make our most intimate connection every day through the mouth." The

"Thank heaven for this food and this company. May it be good for us."

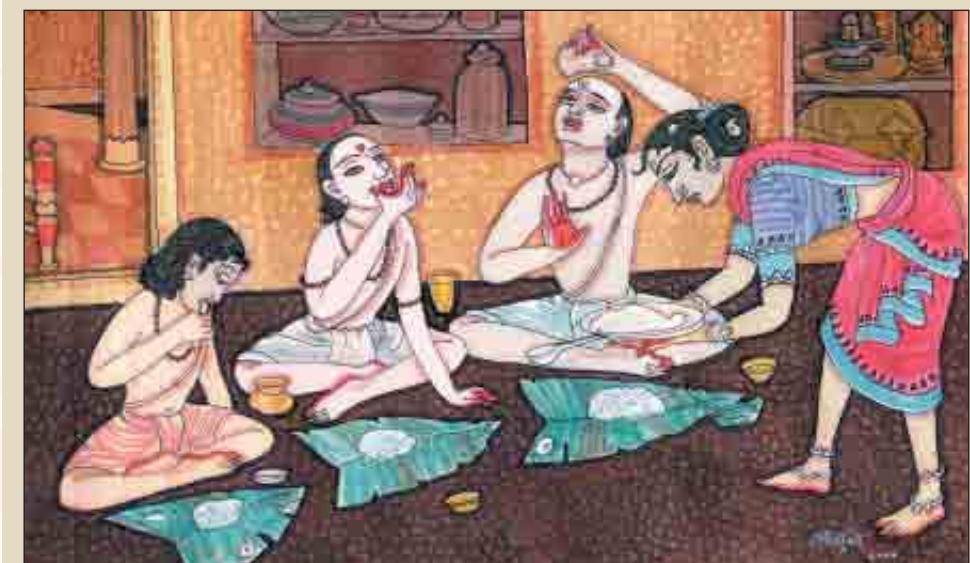
—Damianos Theodosios

practice of offering food affirms that "I do participate and I am of this fabric," so that the act of eating turns into an act of compassion.

A traditional Buddhist prayer says, "In this food I see clearly the presence of the entire universe supporting my existence."

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "For each new morning with its light. For rest and shelter of the night. For health and food, for love and friends. For everything thy goodness sends."

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S. RAJAM

A Traditional Prayer of Gratitude To the Source of Sustenance

A Bhojana Mantra Chanted by Hindus Before Meals

ॐ अन्नपूर्णे सदापूर्णे शङ्करप्राणवल्लभे ।

ज्ञानवैराग्यसिद्ध्यर्थं भिक्षां देहि च पार्वती ॥

माता च पार्वती देवी पिता देवो महेश्वरः ।

बांधवाः शिवभक्ताश्च स्वदेशो भुवनतयम् ॥

ॐ पूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदं पूर्णात्पूर्णमुदच्यते ।

पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते ॥

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

ॐ शिवार्पणमस्तु ॥

Aum annapūrṇe sadāpūrṇe Śāṅkaraprāṇa vallabhe,

Jñānavairāgya siddhyartham bhikshām dehi cha Pārvati.

Mātā cha Pārvati Devi pītā Devo Maheśvarah,

Bāndhavāḥ Śiva bhaktāścha svadeśo bhuvanatrayam.

Aum pūrṇamadah pūrṇamadām pūrṇātpūrṇam udachyate,

Pūrṇasya pūrṇamadāya pūrṇame vāvā śishyate.

Aum sāntih sāntih sāntih.

Aum Śivārpaṇamastu.

Aum, beloved Shakti of Siva, fullness everlasting and fully manifest as this food; O, Mother of the universe, nourish us with this gift of food so that we may attain knowledge, dispassion and spiritual perfection. Goddess Parvati is my mother. God Maheshvara is my father. All devotees of Siva are my family. All three worlds are my home. Aum, That is Fullness. Creation is fullness. From Divine Fullness flows this world's fullness. This fullness issues from that Fullness, yet that Fullness remains full. Aum, peace, peace, peace. Aum, this I offer unto Siva.

LINES 1-4 ARE FROM SRI ADI SHANKARA'S ANNAPURNASHTAKAM. LINES 5-6 ARE THE ISHA UPANISHAD INVOCATION. LINES 7-8 ARE A TRADITIONAL SAIVA CLOSING.



Amy the deer and Ransom the dog are close friends: Animal buddies star in the November, 2012, PBS Nature film *Animal Odd Couples* documented a number of cross-species relationships that inspired millions with the message that "love knows no boundaries."

N A T U R E

Animals Have Souls and Feelings, Just Like We Do

Discoveries about other animals' consciousness challenge the arrogance of *Homo sapiens* and call for greater compassion and nonviolence in our relations

BY MATTHEW McDERMOTT, NEW YORK

THE WORLDS OF BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH and animal rights advocacy are becoming more closely aligned with traditional Hindu views on the relationship between animals, humans and existence itself.

Scientific studies are showing us that many animal species have rich emotional lives, complex social interactions and advanced cognitive powers. Some even have a sense of fairness, and of right and wrong. The traditional Western scientific view—that animals are little more than unthinking, unfeeling biological machines, sharply distinguished from humans—is being upended. Though that process is certainly far from complete, last summer a conference of neuroscientists at the University of Cambridge, UK, produced "The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness." Publicly proclaimed on July 7, 2012, it basically states that animals and humans are conscious and aware to the same degree as one another. The signing of the declaration by the conference attendees was memorialized by CBS *60 Minutes*. See fcnconference.org to download the full

declaration.

The evidence calls for a new paradigm in our relationships with other creatures, one that is rooted in the ancient Hindu values of *ahimsa* and *karunya*—nonviolence and compassion.

Traditional Hindu thought has never erected a high wall between human existence and animal existence, while recognizing that there are important distinctions between the two. Swamini Svatmavidyananda, resident acharya at Arsha Vijnana Gurukulum in Georgia, explains:

"In the vision of the *Vedas* there is only one presence, one source of consciousness, known as Brahman, which is limitless and all pervasive, and which is the truth of one's self. All that is here, known and unknown, is pervaded by this consciousness. Without undergoing any change, this self-evident consciousness manifests as the very presence in all things sentient and insentient. The air we breathe, the light of the sun, oceans, rivers, mountains and forests, are all Ishvara, God. Animals are also manifestations of Brahman, as are humans."

Sharma succinctly compares mainstream Western thought with the Hindu perspective on animals: "In Western thought the distinction between the animal and the

"Seen from this view, there is no difference

between the two. However, from the standpoint of the forms themselves, there is a difference in the extent of self-awareness, in terms of free will. Although animals are self-aware, and some even appear to have a moral compass, this awareness is rudimentary compared to that of human beings."

Professor Arvind Sharma of McGill University in Montreal notes that some confusion arises because in English we often use the word *soul* to describe what in Hindu thought is expressed with multiple words. On one hand, *soul* can refer to the atman. From this perspective humans and animals, as well as inanimate objects, are not different. But *soul* is also often used to refer to the subtle body.

"When we come to the subtle body, to the mind, then we can say that the human mind is more developed than the animal mind," Sharma says. "You might say then that the human soul is different than the animal soul."

Sharma succinctly compares mainstream Western thought with the Hindu perspective on animals: "In Western thought the

Continued on page 66



As it evolves, science discovers humanlike traits in other animals.

1 Birds that Mourn their Dead

That elephants and great apes mourn their dead is pretty obvious. Even if some object to the word *mourn*, these animals certainly have death rituals for members of their family or group. What's becoming clear now is that such behavior isn't limited to these species. A new study from the University of California, Davis shows that Western Scrub Jays call other Scrub Jays over to the dead bodies of their cousins and conduct "cacophonous funerals."

The scientists write: "On encountering a dead jay, prostrate on the ground, jays flew into a tree and began a series of loud, screeching calls that attracted other jays. The summoned birds perched on trees and fences around the body and joined in the calling. These gatherings could last from a few seconds to as long as 30 minutes."

Though the scientists, in typically restrained fashion, are cautious to ascribe emotional or ritual meaning to the event, they aren't ruling it out either, saying we still have much more to learn.



DAVID MENDOZA

2 Bears that Analyze and Count

While the significant mental abilities of chimpanzees and other apes has been well documented, research coming out this past June shows that the ability to count may not be limited to primates.

Writing in the journal *Animal Behavior*, scientists from Oakland University and Georgia State University found that in tests where American Black Bears were rewarded for touching screens with various numbers of dots, "one bear was able to discriminate numerically large arrays of moving dots, and a subset of moving dots from within the larger array, even when area and number were incongruent. Although the bears used area as a cue to guide their responses, they were also able to use number as a cue."



COURTESY US FWS MIKE BENDER

with monkeys, and suggests that bears may also show other forms of sophisticated quantitative abilities."

3 Monkeys' Intellectual Self-Doubt

Macaques show a remarkable awareness about the limits of their mental abilities. For example, scientists trained these Old-World monkeys to play a basic computer game that rewarded correct answers with edible treats. It also offered the option to skip questions. Scientists found that when a particular test was too difficult, the macaques chose to pass and move on to easier questions and win more treats.

Professor John David Smith, one of a team of three scientists that conducted the study, told the BBC, "Monkeys apparently appreciate when they are likely to make an error. They seem to know when they don't know." Interestingly, playing the same game, New World monkeys, that is, those native to the Americas, did not choose to pass.



TAMBAKO THE JAGUAR

4 Octopuses Build Coconut Fortresses

The list of animal species observed to use tools, a trait once thought to differentiate humans from other animals, has expanded to include at least one invertebrate species. In 2009 scientists from Australia observed octopuses in Indonesia carrying coconut shells with them and then stacking them up as protection against predators, sometimes hiding inside them, putting two halves of a coconut together to form a shell. One of the scientists notes that while she has observed octopuses hiding in coconut shells many times, "I never expected to find an octopus that stacks multiple coconut shells and jogs across the seafloor carrying them."



ROGER STEENE



human is maximized, whereas in Hindu thought it is minimized.

"This even applies to moksha, liberation. While a human incarnation is the state from which liberation is most accessible, that doesn't mean that animals too cannot achieve liberation—even if, because they are often too concerned with the business of living and dying, with expressing their animal instincts, to achieve this state.

"One famous example of this is the cow Lakshmi, who lived at Ramana Maharshi's ashram in Tamil Nadu. She died in the presence of the great sage, who proclaimed, to the somewhat surprise of his disciples, that Lakshmi had become liberated. Asked if he was using the term literally or metaphorically, Ramana Maharshi replied that he was indeed using it literally."

Ultimately though, Swamini Svatmavidyananda reminds us, "Each incarnation is a journey for the individual, the traveling *jiva*. The same *jiva* can be in a human body in one life and be incarnated as an animal in the next. Whether one has a human or an animal incarnation is due to one's karmic residues. So long as one is mired in separation



COURTESY, ARSHA VIJNANA GURUKULAM

Swamini Svatmavidyananda:
resident acharya of the Arsha Vijnana Gurukulam, Georgia, founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. See www.arshavm.org

whole."

Though the modern animal rights community differs in many respects from Hindu thought, both share the basic understanding that the distinctions between humans and other animals are really a matter of degree rather than of kind.

HINDUISM TODAY asked several leading thinkers to share their views on humanity's ideal relationship with animals (see below). The over-arching tone in each message is that there should be respect and compassion towards animals.

Marc Bekoff, an eminent biologist and ecologist from the University of Colorado, Boulder, summed it up succinctly, "The ideal relationship with nonhuman animals would be one of mutual and peaceful coexistence."

caused by self-ignorance, one will continue to go through endless incarnations, breaking this cycle only through gaining the knowledge that all that is here is one limitless

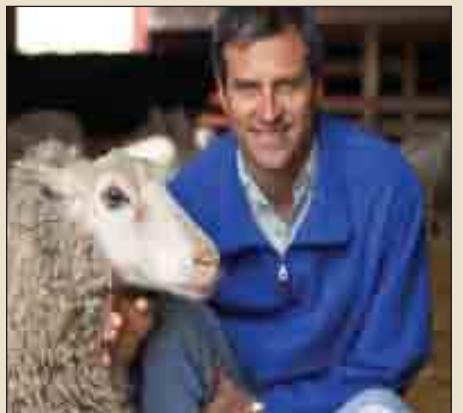
Animal rights issues: mutually beneficial relations versus exploitation, the

Gene Baur
President and co-founder of Farm Sanctuary, an animal protection organization with facilities in New York and California.

Q: Is it possible to have a compassionate, respectful relationship with animals on a working farm, or even with service and companion animals?

A: It all boils down to the relationship. Is it one that is mutually beneficial, or is it one of exploitation where one party takes and the other has something taken from them, without it being their choice or without it being in their interest?

The way things are done now in animal production, it is clearly an exploitative



DEREK GOODWIN

relationship. These animals are being bred specifically for their milk and eggs or to be killed for food. They are treated basically as egg-making or milk-making machines. There is no regard for their welfare.

Going forward, how we relate to other animals is an open question. The standard is to ask, "Is this a mutually beneficial relationship, over generations, or is it one of exploitation?"

When it comes to animals raised for food, it's almost always been based on exploitation. When it comes to domesticated animals kept as companions—cats and dogs—it is not so clear. There are puppy mills that breed these animals and sell them for profit. That's clearly an exploitative relationship. But a lot of the people that are caring for these animals are doing the best they can, providing good homes, or as good a home as possible, to animals in need. They are doing their best with a bad situation.

Peter Singer
The Ira W DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. Author of *Animal Liberation* (1975), widely cited as a foundational book on animal rights.

Q: What is humanity's ideal relationship with animals and how is this changing?

A: One in which we reject speciesism and give equal consideration to the interests of all animals. This relationship is clearly changing, and moving in the right direction, although

much too slowly. But we can see many changes. Perhaps the best example is the abolition of some of the worst forms of factory farming across the entire European Union and, in the US, the passing of the referendum in California in 2008 that requires giving all animals space to move around, turn around and spread their limbs without touching another animal or the sides of their cage or stall.

Q: Is there a hierarchy of animals in terms of how humans should treat them?

A: Humans are different because we have higher intellectual abilities—but being less intelligent doesn't mean that you suffer less when you are mistreated. There is a hierarchy in terms of the grounds for believing that there is a capacity to suffer. With vertebrates



DENISE APPELWHITE

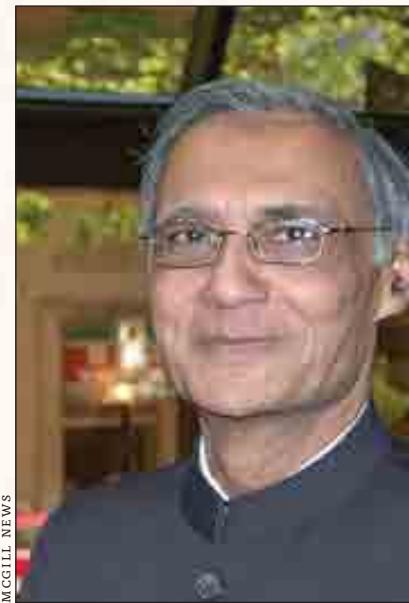


That's a pretty close match to the traditional Hindu viewpoint expressed by Swamini Svatmavidyananda:

"The relationship advocated between humans and the natural world is one of harmonic interdependence, whose guiding tenet is ahimsa, noninjury. Since we do not have the power to create, we do not have the right to destroy anything, including our own bodies. We do not even cut a blade of grass used for ritual worship without saying a prayer for forgiveness, what to talk of killing animals for food. The *Vedas*, which teach about the interconnectedness of everything in creation, urge us to protect animals and plants, as they sustain life."

Contemporary society falls far short of this ideal, though progress is slowly being made. Laws have been passed attempting to improve the welfare of farm animals around the world, and there is a growing awareness of their plight.

Professor Sharma cites the disconnect between producer and consumer that began with the Industrial Revolution as contributing to the disconnect between humans, animals and with nature as a whole. This is



furthered by consumer society and an economy that encourages, both tacitly and explicitly, individual pursuit of instant gratification above most all else.

Dr. Arvind Sharma: Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University. Sharma's work focuses on comparative religion, Hinduism and the role of women in religion.

Asked how we might bridge the gap between the current and ideal human-animal relationship, Swamini Svatmavidyananda clearly expresses the Hindu view that individual unfoldment is the basis of human progress:

"One has to grow emotionally to extend the same care that one has for one's body to all things that are vulnerable and need caring. One grows into a compassionate person to whom nothing is away from oneself. Since everything in creation is interconnected, the well-being of our surroundings is inextricably connected to our own well-being. When we lead our lives with this mindfulness, we are in the flow of a cosmic ecology. We live peacefully, without rubbing against anything. That is the real definition of a Hindu."

Fallacies of hierarchical thinking—we all suffer; we all deserve compassion

these grounds are very strong. With invertebrates, for example insects, these grounds are often not so strong.

Marc Bekoff
Professor Emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Author of *The Emotional Lives of Animals*.

Q: In what ways are humans and nonhuman animals different and similar?

A: There are lots of similarities among all animals, as well as a lot of differences—certainly across mammals and birds, and now we're learning about fish, their emotional lives, their sentience, their ability to feel pain and to suffer, and also to feel joy. We humans have tried very hard to separate ourselves, but the only notable differences I see are that we're the only species that cooks food and we're the only species that shows such incredible evil.

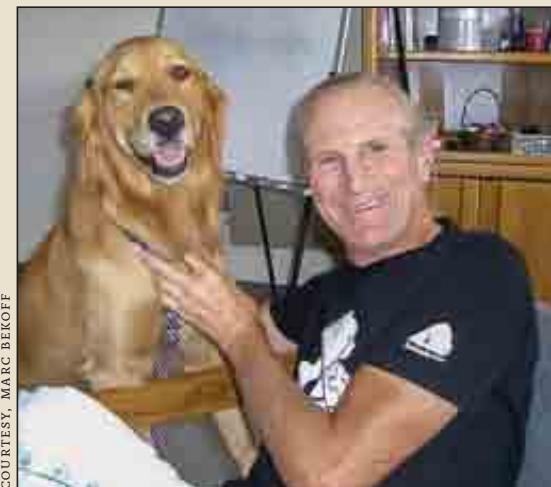
As research examines the general field of animal cognition, we're really learning that improbable animals do amazing things. For instance, we used to think of man as the only tool-maker until Jane Goodall discovered that other animals use tools, too. New Caledonian crows are amazing tool users, for example.

And scientists have started to study the sentience of fish. There's tons of research now showing that fish are conscious beings.

They are sentient beings. They feel pain. They're very smart. They deceive other fish. They cooperate with other fish. They respond to morphine in exactly the same ways that we do.

Q: Do you think there's a hierarchy of animals?

A: A lot of people set up hierarchies in terms of higher and lower species. They talk about smarter and less-smart species. But as a biologist I don't think we should establish hierarchies; we shouldn't talk about lower and higher species. Animals always do what they need to do to be card-carrying members of



COURTESY, MARC BEKOFF

their species.

Q: It's pretty meaningless to me, honestly, to ask if a cat is smarter than a dog, or whether birds are smarter than chimpanzees because they can use more sophisticated tools. Do you agree?

A: When a chimpanzee does something a bird can't do, people don't hesitate to say the chimpanzee is smarter than the bird. But when the bird does something the chimpanzee can't do, no one says the bird is smarter than the chimpanzee. Hierarchies are really bad biology, as far as I'm concerned.

Q: How do we humans get to what you would consider to be an ideal relationship with animals?

A: One way to get there is to incorporate children into what we're doing. I do a lot of work with kids because I see them as ambassadors for the future. But I also think that a great way to make progress is to really lay out very clearly what we've been doing to innumerable habitats, how it's not sustainable.

We also need to really stress the importance of compassion—that it's OK to be compassionate; we don't need excuses to be compassionate. I always say compassion begets compassion. We can spread compassion by being compassionate.



YOUTH

My Journey Toward Hinduism

On the steps of Har ki Pauri Ghat in Haridwar, this young second-generation Indian woman from the UK finally connected with her faith

BY HEMA RISHI

I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN LONDON. MINE WAS A mixed and sometimes confused upbringing. Life away from home was markedly English, with English friends and English schooling. In kindergarten and first grade, my sister and I were even taught Christian hymns and prayers during morning assembly.

Home life was completely different, very Indian in culture, though Hinduism was not emphasized. My parents faced the same dilemma that many other immigrant couples did: How beneficial would it be to teach our young children Hinduism? Would it be better to teach them the skills and culture that would help them integrate into the society in which they now lived? Whatever the case, as a child I was happy with this mix, and there was a lot of love from family and friends.

I wasn't formally taught religion at home or at school. There was, however, the strong influence of my grandmother who lived with us. Born in Shimla in North India in 1932, she came to London during the early 1970s, bringing many traditions of the time with her. Despite the generation gap, we seemed to find common ground. We would often sit together on a wet Sunday afternoon whiling away the hours. I watched as she stitched together her latest crafts project. Her fingers were almost meditative as they worked on every single stitch. Each hypnotic movement of the needle and thread was a representation of a relaxed and fully conscious awareness. This was the first and earliest lesson on Hinduism that I remember, although I did not know this at the time.

Cultural traditions featured in my young adult life more than religion, as would be the case with most Hindus born outside India. For example, the idea of an arranged marriage was drummed into my head as I reached my teenage years—a concept I found then, and still find, extremely suffocating. My English friends didn't have such restrictions and struggled to understand why I couldn't do the same social things that they could. Arriving home one evening after a long day at work, I found a young man gingerly sipping on a cup of tea and awkwardly nibbling on the corner of a biscuit. Later I was told that he came to "view" me for potential marriage material. Luckily, I was deemed unsuitable!

As a young woman brought up outside of what earlier generations of my family called home—India—I found it impossible to cast aside my Western upbringing at a moment's notice. Resentment grew within me and I rebelled, adopting Western clothes along with the matching attitudes. I struggled long and hard trying to accept my Indian identity, but there was no one to answer my many questions. Finally, I wrongly concluded our religion was to blame.

In 2000 my grandfather passed away, and that year marked the beginning of my path toward Hinduism. Before he died, he had



asked the family to take his ashes to Har Ki Pauri Ghat in Haridwar and scatter them in the river Ganga in accord with ancient Hindu practice. It was important to him that he complete this cycle of birth in the traditional manner.

This—my first pilgrimage to India—was a real eye opener! I was astounded to see the many holy men and women worshiping by the sacred Ganga. Thousands of pilgrims were there as well, each on their own personal journey. There was no sign of the petty everyday troubles that consume many of us. The day was extremely hot; this was no place for vanity. Those who could not walk were carried by loved ones. No one was a burden. Each individual was at the river for one reason: their faith, a faith

strong enough to draw people from not only India, but from all over the world. I had never experienced such a powerful feeling before. All my prior ideas about Hinduism were challenged and changed in an instant. The immersion ceremony itself was short and modest, its elements beautifully simple—marigold flowers and water.

As I watched the thousands of pilgrims, I saw life in its purest form before me. Some adults were bathing in the river while children were playing, hanging from safety chains suspended from the bridges. Others had also come, as we had, to say goodbye to loved ones in the presence of the holy people worshiping here. The swift current washed everything downstream. A newfound release, a freedom from the restriction that had previously been associated with Hinduism was gone. From this moment I felt Hindu.

I also realized that I had for many years mistakenly linked culture and religion, when in fact they are two entirely separate entities. The culture was a framework that for many of our ancestors kept society together and which they brought with them when settling in other countries. It was a form of identity, if you like, a way to safeguard who they were in a strange land.

My journey to Hinduism continues. I have learned it is simply "being" rather than "trying to be." Hinduism does not ask me, as a woman, to satisfy certain cultural demands. There is no raging super power that will punish me because I have not carried out a certain ritual on a particular day. It is not controlled by a set of stringent rules dictating how one should live. It is instead a deep breath of cool fresh air for those who embrace it. Meditation, reflection and thought to enhance one's beliefs are much more productive than half-hearted actions. Hinduism is now more relevant to me and my life than ever, part of my chosen path rather than a system of beliefs forced upon me.

HEMA RISHI, 32, is a freelance writer currently based in the United Kingdom. She currently writes for search engine Yahoo as well as other online sites. Email: hemarishi@rocketmail.com



September, 2011: HAF's DC delegation celebrates the ninth annual Capitol Hill Reception

Hindu American Foundation

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our Capitol Hill reception is culmination of a full day's worth of meetings with Members of Congress to discuss issues affecting the Hindu community, from Hindu human rights to healthier school meals in public schools to religious liberty.

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Hindu Heritage Endowment

WAYS OF GIVING THAT DON'T TAX YOUR FINANCES

When the Hindu Heritage Endowment staged its first-ever estate planning seminar in Walnut Creek, California, the fissures in the global economy were beginning to show in higher energy and food prices.

The seminar, however, focused on a strategy that works in good times and bad: protection from taxes, court costs and legal fees through sound estate planning.

With the economic meltdown, the Hindu Heritage Endowment is following a similar tack by encouraging ways of giving that allow donors to remain generous while not further taxing their battered finances. Here are some examples.

A 45-year-old marketing executive saw his IRA take a big hit in 2008. Still, he said, "I'm in this for the long run. By including the Hindu Heritage Endowment as a beneficiary of my IRA, I know that whatever the Hindu Heritage Endowment receives will be tax-free. My relatives will have to pay income tax on their share."

He added that the IRA designation is easy to do and has left his current finances unaffected.

A physician in her fifties used a similar strategy with a life insurance policy. "Many people think that life insurance proceeds are not vulnerable to estate tax," she cautioned. "They do not go through probate or get hit by income tax, but if you own the policy, it may be subject to estate tax." She knows that any portion of her life insurance proceeds that goes to the Hindu Heritage Endowment will go free of any tax.

"Besides, it was very easy to do," she explained. "I just filled out a beneficiary designation form naming the Hindu Heritage Endowment for a percentage and mailed it to my insurance company."

The parents of three adult children have a living trust. "We wanted most of our estate to go to our children," the father explained. "We used a residual bequest to accomplish this. It states that whatever remains after our children receive their distributions passes to the Hindu Heritage Endowment."

The three strategies above have common traits: they are tax-free, simple to do and revocable.

Phil Murphy, a former HHE consultant, emphasizes the virtues of revocability in dicey economic times: "Bequests to good causes, whether through IRAs, life insurance, living trust or wills, can always be changed. We remain in control."

Murphy thinks of estate planning as one way to recover from a shaken sense of personal power. "Most of us feel a loss of control when the value of what we own suddenly changes for the worse. But we can channel that anxiety into useful action by reviewing our estate plan. That way we can make sure that those we care about will not face avoidable taxes, fees and court costs. That's always a good idea, but especially when every penny counts."

For more information on estate planning and planned giving, visit the Hindu Heritage Endowment website at www.hheonline.org and click on Planned Giving, then Essentials. Or call Shanmuganathaswami at 808-822-3012 extension 244. For an estate planning toolkit write to hhe@hindu.org.



OCTOBER TO DECEMBER ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment	Anonymous	208.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	41.27
Anonymous	358.66	Barathy Sockanathan	35.00	
Roshan Harilela	375.00	Vayudeva Varadan	54.00	
Vasanthi Krishnan	387.15	Other Donations	4,800.00	
Pathmini Saravanapavan	300.00	Total	5,981.57	
Velupillai Vijayaraghavan	100.00			
Other Donations	43,000.00			
Total	44,521.01			
Tirunavukkarsu Nayyar Gurukulam	Anonymous	591.72		
Microsoft Matching Gifts Program	303.00	Aran Sambandar	216.00	
Venkatasubba & Ushadevi Chenna	500.00	Ramesh Sivanathan	65.81	
Subhash Kumar Choudhary	100.00	Adi Srikantha	108.00	
Kiran Davane	152.00	Vignesh Sukumaran	108.00	
Michael R. Eisen	25.00	Devi Tandavan	25.00	
Anonymous	2609.50	Anba Dayanandan Valayen	12.51	
Naresh Gupta	31.00	Vayudeva Varadan	63.00	
Dheeraj & Geeta Kumari Handa	303.00	Michael Wasylkiw	648.00	
Victoria Lynne Johnson	11.00	Total	6,031.76	
Latha Kannan	153.00			
Vijay S. Singh	250.00			
Pregassen & Selvina Soobramaney	60.00			
Other Donations	83,045.11			
Total	87,542.61			
Iraivan Temple Endowment	Anonymous	324.00		
Microsft Matching Gifts Program	303.00			
Venkatasubba & Ushadevi Chenna	500.00			
Subhash Kumar Choudhary	100.00			
Kiran Davane	152.00			
Michael R. Eisen	25.00			
Anonymous	2609.50			
Naresh Gupta	31.00			
Dheeraj & Geeta Kumari Handa	303.00			
Victoria Lynne Johnson	11.00			
Latha Kannan	153.00			
Vijay S. Singh	250.00			
Pregassen & Selvina Soobramaney	60.00			
Other Donations	83,045.11			
Total	87,542.61			
Kumbhalavalai Ganesha Temple Endowment	Anonymous	441.72		
Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00			
Hinduism Today Production Fund	Anonymous	2,053.49		
Himanshu Bhargav	11.00			
Subhash Kumar Choudhary	200.00			
P.C. Ghosh	90.00			
Hiranya Gowda	93.00			
Mahendra Jagirdar	200.00			
Jothi Kotta	5,000.00			
Hemakshesha Naatha Batumallah	12.00			
Mekaladeva Batumallah	12.00			
Gunavadee Caremben	3.23			
Somasundaram Caremben	3.23			
Sukanta Caremben	3.23			
Victoria Lynne Johnson	11.00			
Juhivaasana Koorthan	4.81			
Kishore Krishna	100.00			
Anil Kumar	27.00			
Siven Moonesawmy	40.00			
Siva Kavinian Moonesawmy	72.23			
Bhaveshan Moorghen	22.58			
Shanda Kumaran Moorghen	22.58			
Udayadeva Moorghen	22.58			
Jogendra Moorogen	1.61			
Vidyadevi Moorogen	1.61			
Toshadevi Natraaj	60.00			
Subramanian Pennathur	49.98			
Thambimutto & Thavam Sivagnanam	79.37			
Hemavalli Sivalingam	3.92			
Total	997.73			
Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund	Anonymous	433.36		
Subhash Kumar Choudhary	50.00			
Charlie Eisenmann	500.00			
Roshan Harilela	375.00			
Alex Roberto	50.00			
Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00			
Vishal Varma	50.00			
Total	1,488.36			
Hindu Education Endowment	Murali Balaji	101.00		
Kedarnath Challakere	251.00			
Rajendra Giri	110.00			
Hasu N. & Hansa H. Patel	100.00			
Total	562.00			
Suntheram Family Trust Fund	Ramachandran Suntheram	1,000.00		
Hindu Press International Endowment Fund	Hiranya Gowda	63.00		
Loving Ganesha Distribution Fund	Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00		
Gassa Patten	1,350.00			
Michael Smith	25.00			
Total	1,600.00			
Himalayan Academy Book Distribution Fund	Saraspades Frazier	50.00		
Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund	Victoria Lynne Johnson	3.00		
Sivakumar Saravanan	1,008.00			
Total	1,061.00			
Saiva Agamas Trust	Ganga Sivanathan	210.00		
Spiritual Park of Mauritius Endowment	Anil Kumar	27.00		
Tirumular Sannidhi Preservation Fund	Shyamadeva Dandapani	55.00		
Hindu Heritage Endowment Administrative Fund	Anonymous	144.97		
Kauai Aadheenam Religious Art and Artifacts Fund	Rajadeva Alahan	102.00		
Vel Mahalingam	499.00			
Manogaran Mardemootoo	6.00			
Total	608.00			
Kadavul Nataraja Ardra Abhishekam Endowment	Anonymous	1,971.17		
Aravindra Chandrasekaran				
Payal Sehgal				
Anonymous				
Total				
A. Saravanapavan Family Murugan Temple Pillaiyiar Shrine Fund	Hotranaatha Ajaya	33.00		
Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00			
Thank You Bodhinatha Fund	Christopher Brooking	5.00		
Anonymous	1,758.17			
Total				
Kauai Aadheenam Matavasi Medical Fund	Shyamadeva Dandapani	108.00		
William & Barbara Bachmann	100.00			
Shyamadeva Dandapani	55.00			
Kulagan Moonesawmy	19.25			
Carmen Debora Murbach	300.00			
Gouri Nadason	174.72			
Toshadevi Natraaj	60.00			
Aran Sambandar	162.00			
Total	943.00			
Murugamoothi Thirukkovil Endowment	Anonymous	11,166,342.48		
Panchangam Endowment Fund	Arvind Chandrakantan	251.00		
Prabin Gautam	108.00			
Anil Kumar	27.00			
Mihir Meghanai	1,000.00			
Anonymous	1,000.00			
Total	2,386.00			
Digital Dharma Endowment	Arvind Chandrakantan	251.00		
Shama Vinayaga	785.09			
Anonymous	216.72			
Total	1,001.81			
Insurance Premiums	Mrunal Patel	3,003.00		
Kauai Aadheenam Renovation Endowment	Other Donations	600.00		
Total Contributions	\$233,978.34			
Funds at Market Value, Dec 31, 2012	Total Endowment Funds	\$10,942,791.79		
Total Pooled Income Funds	\$223,550.69			
Grand Total	\$11,166,342.48			

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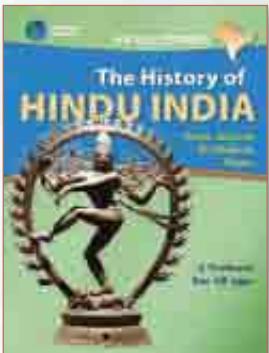


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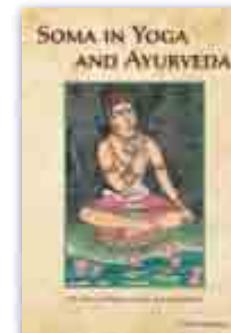
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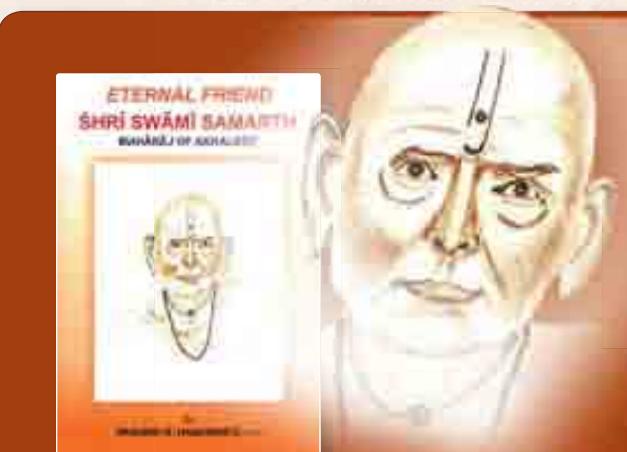
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- Jul 14-20 **Children's Retreat I**
(Sun-Sat) Ages 9-12, unaccompanied by parents
- Jul 21-27 **Family Vedanta Retreat I**
(Sun-Sat) Swami Veditatmananda, Vivekachudamani continued.
- Jul 21-27 **Children's Retreat II**
(Sun-Sat) Unaccompanied by parents
- Jul 28-Aug 3 **Family Vedanta Retreat II**
(Sun-Sat) Pujya Swamiji, Yasmin Sarvani Butani, and Swami Veditatmananda, Gita, chapter IV, continued
- Aug 4-11 **Family Vedanta Retreat III**
(Sun-Sun) Pujya Swamiji, Naayam Atma Pravachanena Labyaha, and Swami Swami Veditatmananda, Gita, chapter IV, continued
- Aug 11 **Pujya Swamiji's 83rd Birthday**
(Sun) at the Gurukulam
- Aug 11-16 **Carnatic Music Workshop**
(Sun-Fri) with Ramachandran
- Aug 11-16 **Purna Vidya Family Teachers' Training**
- Aug 18 **Gurukulam's 27th Anniversary**
(Sun) Pujya Swamiji, Living in the Present

- Aug 22-25 **Patrons' Retreat I** • Pujya (Thu-Sun) Swamiji, Satsangena Nisangastvam and Swami Tattvavidananda, Sthithaprajnathaa - 1
- Aug 30-Sep 2 **Patrons' Retreat II**, Pujya Swamiji, (Fri-Mon) Essence of Sadanapanchakam and Swami Tattvavidananda, Sthithaprajnathaa - 2
- Sep 6-13 **Yoga and Sound**, Yogi R. Patel, (Flri-Fri) Pandit M. Desai and Pujya Swamiji
- Sep 14-21 **One-Week Vedanta Course for Adults**, Pujya Swamiji, Om Iti Aekath Aksharam & Swami Tattvavidananda, Panchadasi
- Sep 22-Oct 5 **Two-Week Vedanta Course for Adults**, Pujya Swamiji, Upadesa Sahasri Cont. and Swami Tattvavidananda, Bhruguvalli
- Oct 8-Nov 26 **Fall Vedanta Six-Week Course for Adults**, Swami Tattvavidananda, Chandogya 6th ch. with Sankara bhashyam and Gita 10th chapter with Sankara bhashya.
- Nov 28-Dec 1 **Thanksgiving Family Vedanta Retreat**, Swami Tattvavidananda, Meditation and Yoga
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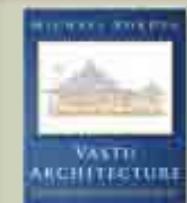
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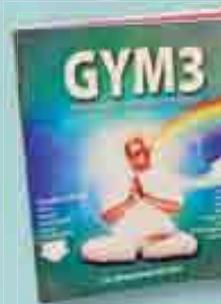
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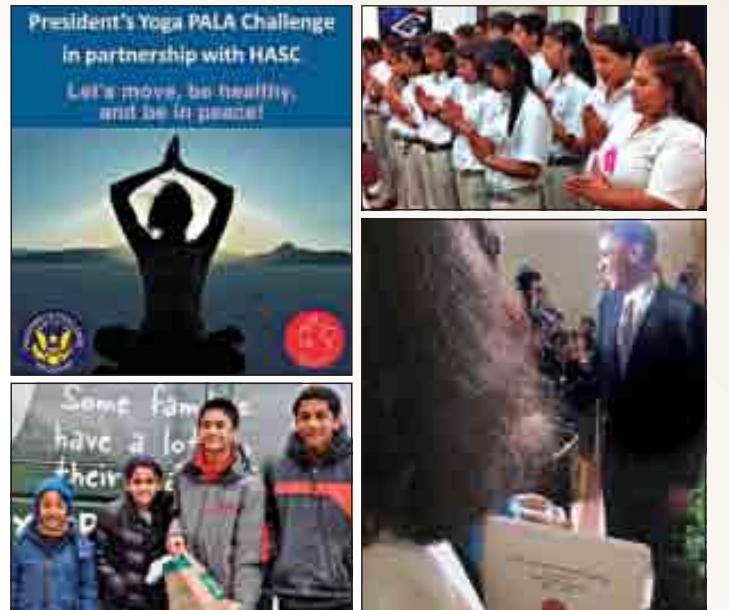


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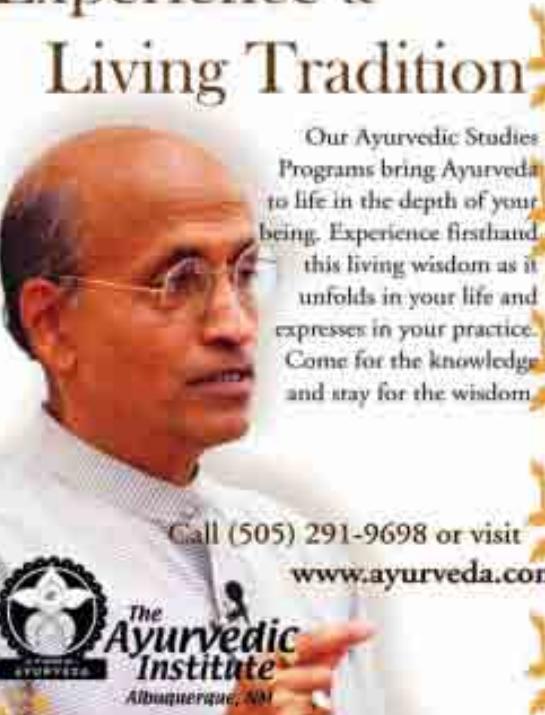
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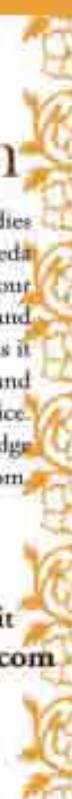


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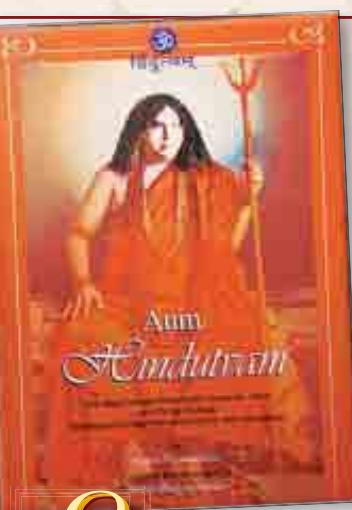
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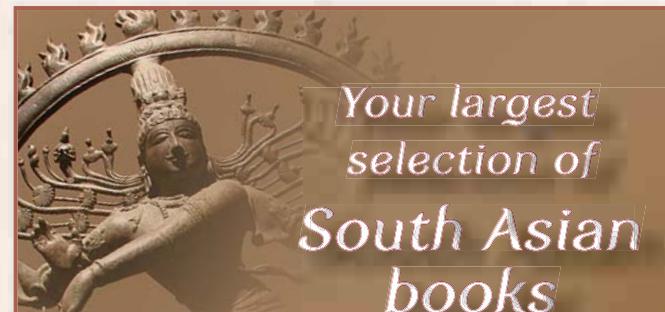
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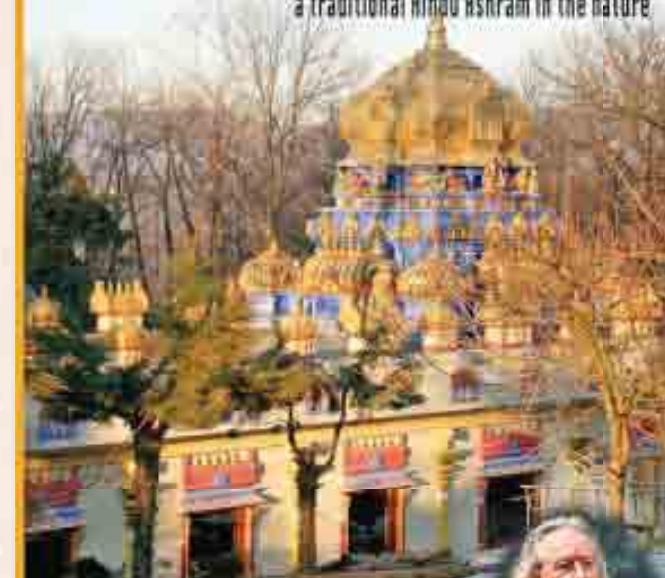
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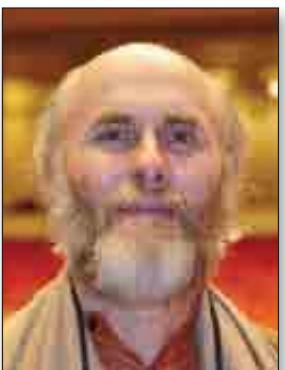


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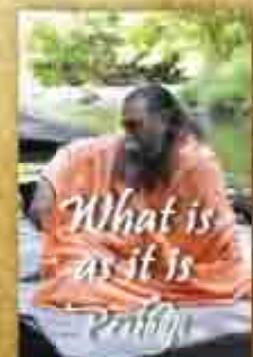
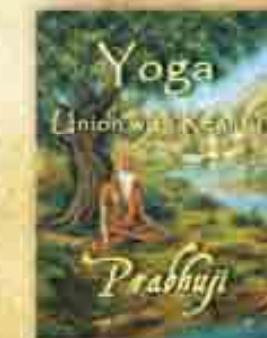
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article, and anyone who writes an article may request a rating. The assessed articles of any given category are organized by a bot program that creates an updated list of articles. A table (bottom left) shows their ratings from top to bottom: Feature Article, Good Article, B, C, Start and Stub. It also charts the importance of the subject: Top, High, Middle, Low. This allows editors to easily obtain an overview, and see which articles merit attention first, according to their importance. There are to date 5,031 articles in WikiProject: Hinduism.

Dr. Avishkar Tyagi of San Diego, California, is an active participant who has been contributing to Wikipedia for seven years. His deep interest in religion led him to write and edit articles on Hinduism. He observes, "The biggest challenge has been bridging the gap between East and West."

It would be hard for most casual browsers to grasp the amount of effort that collaborators put into maintaining the quality and relevance of the various pages, and their level of enthusiasm for this unpaid work. Dr. Tyagi shared, "When I was a young boy, my parents took me to see stone workers in Agra. I was fascinated to see the beautiful tiny statuettes of Divinity form under their calloused hands. The process of watching an article form is like seeing a sculpture form from stone, or a pot from clay, made by many hands. Working on an article alone is an internal meditation." When asked what he enjoys most about the WikiProject, Dr. Tyagi replied that he appreciates how much he



SHUTTERSTOCK

Number one: An article about Lord Ganesha is WikiProject: Hinduism's highest rated and most important.

learns from working with other like-minded individuals who see the process of collaboration as something inherently spiritual.

For comparison, Biography is the largest WikiProject, encompassing over one million articles about notable figures throughout history. John Carter, an editor of that project, points out, "The subject area is in general much more clear-cut than many other articles" and therefore easy to edit. In contrast, Hindu subjects are often open to dispute and varied interpretations.

If you are interested in joining WikiProject:Hinduism, contributing and learning from other experts and enthusiasts, you may inquire on the project's Talk Page (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_talk:WikiProject_Hinduism). You may also sign up for the project on the Participant's list (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Hinduism/Participants).

Assessment						
Quality	Importance					
	Top	High	Mid	Low	NA	???
A	1	2	2	5		10
B+	8	20	25	8		51
B	34	56	68	31	16	205
C	36	48	100	46	10	240
Start	46	256	621	421	431	1,835
Stub	4	103	366	797	710	1,989
Unassessed	1	8	16	29	45	92
NA	2	1	3	571		577
Assessed	130	495	1,198	1,334	571	1,281
Unassessed			1	21	22	
Total	130	495	1,198	1,335	571	1,302
						5,031